



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Ontological Security and the European Union Global Strategy

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**Abstract:**

This paper analyzes the relationship between identity and security policies by critically engaging with the European Union Global Strategy (2016). It employs a conceptual perspective derived from ontological security, whereby identity is a socio-psychological construct that requires consistency over time and external recognition. The methodology of discourse analysis has been used to show how the meanings about the European Union's identity as security provider have been (re)articulated, which indicates the ongoing search for ontological security. The Global Strategy has proposed a more grounded vision for the European Union's international role, among which the move from democracy promotion to the fostering of resilience. The redefinitions were a necessary step to address the unstable foundations of the European Union's identity narratives, considering the failed expectations of the European Security Strategy (2003) in general and the problematic eastern vicinity in particular. However, the discursive shifts within the Global Strategy are only a temporary solution and cannot reinforce the Union's ontological security in the long run. They have not surpassed the fundamental challenges faced by the European Union in its quest to become a credible security provider, affirmed by other international security actors and the empirical reality.

**Keywords:** *identity; ontological security; European Union; foreign policy*

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The European Union (EU) as a collective actor has put effort into carving out its foreign policy and security niche in the international system, but the journey is ongoing. Such a task features considerable difficulties, because the EU is inevitably and sometimes unjustly compared to international security players like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the United States (US). Both the European Security Strategy - ESS (2003) and the EU Global Strategy – EUGS (2016) have constituted “important sites for narrating the EU into existence as a security actor” (Mälksoo, 2016: 374). Comparisons between the strategies are used to emphasize the shifts in discourse, but the focus is on the EUGS - a key text that has updated the concepts and approaches circulated by the ESS, while promoting a grounded vision for the EU’s regional and international role.

Despite a rather “grandiose title” (Dijkstra, 2016: 370), the EUGS has revised the EU’s priorities along two specific coordinates: internal security and the resilience of its surrounding regions. The apparent contrast prompted this article to examine the EUGS from an ontological security view, tracing how the EU’s identity as security provider has been (re)articulated. The identity narratives have undergone several redefinitions, mostly to incorporate the great changes in the international security context since 2003. Overall, the EU has constructed a balanced security provider identity, which seeks to distinguish itself from conventional security agents – primarily the US. A wise choice that brings more credibility to the identity narratives, taking into account the undeniable fact that the EU lacks the common military resources necessary for a security provider relying on hard power.

With regards to structure, the arguments of the article have been organized in three sections – conceptual perspective and methodology, the discussion of the EUGS and concluding remarks. The conceptual part introduces the framework based on ontological security, which draws insights from three socio-psychological premises about identity and discourse. The methodological tool adopted here is a form of discourse analysis, as defined by the process of “articulation” (Weldes, 1999). The conceptual perspective and methodology lay the groundwork for a discursive study of the EUGS and an empirical look at the EU’s security policies in the eastern neighbourhood.

### **Conceptual Perspective and Methodology**

Traditional security studies have often been preoccupied with the physical security of states in the international arena. While physical security is a constant concern, ontological security takes a broader approach and analyzes “the seeking of a consistent self through time and space and the desire to have that self recognized and affirmed by others” (Innes, Steele, 2014: 15). A state maintains its “self-concepts” through identity narratives that are translated into “routinized foreign policy actions”; when “this sense of self-identity” has been disrupted, the state aims “to re-establish routines that can, once again, consistently maintain self-identity” (Steele, 2008: 3). These are necessary steps considering that “not only physical, but also social survival is at stake” in international relations (Ringmar, 2002: 116). Social survival involves articulating stable identity narratives, which at the very least are not contested by others. For instance, though the EU has persistently sought to shape an identity niche for itself as security provider in international affairs, this identity needs to be affirmed by other prominent security actors and by the empirical reality. Otherwise, the articulations remain an internally driven aspiration that lacks external credibility.

The ontological security perspective adopted here draws from three socio-psychological insights related to identity and discourse. The first premise is that states and

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international organizations are comparable to individuals, hence being treated as subjects. The anthropomorphization becomes natural since both states and international organizations “are governed by people in the form of their individual leaders” (Greenhill, 2008: 346). But parallels between states/ international organizations and individuals can be problematic, because the former two have “no unified consciousness, no single memory, and no subjective will” (Ringmar, 2011: 4). The debate has been settled in a convincing manner by arguing that the subjectivity of states is formalized in international law, where a state represents “a subject endowed with rights and obligations, and it is an actor who can think rationally and be held responsible for the consequences of its actions” (Ringmar, 2011: 5). The same argument can be extended to the EU, which is an organization of states based on formal and legally binding treaties.

The second premise conceptualizes “identity” as the product of socio-cognitive processes of self-identification and categorization, with relevance to explaining intergroup behaviour (Tajfel, 1981). Identity stems from being member of a specific social group, which creates narrative boundaries between the self and others. It strives to “convey who we are or are perceived to be” and the ways in which we “locate ourselves and others in the social world” (Mole, 2007: 3). The process of making salient “us and them” distinctions influences how actors see each other, as these categories perceptually enhance similarities within the group (“we’re all much the same”) and stress the differences between groups (“we’re different from them”) (Tajfel, 1981: 101). It is also significant to note that “the nature of groups, the signifiers used to demarcate group boundaries or the group norms that prevail at any given time” are “socially constructed and therefore culturally specific and historically contingent” (Theiler, 2003: 262).

The third premise brings in discourse analysis as a methodological tool. The concept of “discourse” was founded by Michel Foucault, who employed various understandings of it. His broadening of the term was intentional and clearly said – “instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word ‘discourse’, I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (Foucault, 2002: 90). Apart from his definition of “discourse”, this article does not draw inspiration from Foucault’s work.

A great advantage of discourse analysis as methodological instrument is its flexibility. Instead of applying a fixed mechanism to every empirical case, some discourse scholars employ the approach in less constricting ways and “articulate their concepts in each particular enactment of concrete research” (Howarth, Norval, Stavrakakis, 2000: 5). Rather than prescribing one specific manner of conducting investigations, discourse analysis stands for a general orientation to the study of constructed social phenomena, underpinning social elements, historical embeddedness and consequences in terms of representations, identities and knowledge (Mills, 2004: 124). Our interest lies in the relationship between identity and discourse as illustrated in security strategies and policies. That is why the methodological approach has been tailored to serve the research purpose.

The methodology of discourse analysis adopted here relies on the idea that “[d]iscourse’ is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience” (Mills, 2004: 6). As a research method, the objective of discourse analysis is to uncover the manner in which versions of the world,

society, events and inner psychological universes are (re)defined in discourse (Potter, 1997: 146). Discourse researchers tend to reject “epistemic realism” and prefer “a logic of interpretation that acknowledges the improbability of cataloguing, calculating and specifying ‘real causes’”, while looking closely at “the manifest political consequences of adopting one mode of representation over another” (Milliken, 1999: 225-226).

Here the interpretative approach has investigated the process of “articulation” as conceptualized by Weldes (1999: 98-99) – “the process through which meaning is produced out of extant cultural raw materials or linguistic resources. Meaning is created and temporarily fixed by establishing chains of connotations among different linguistic elements. In this way, different terms and ideas come to connote or to ‘summon’ one another, to be welded into associative chains that make up an identifiable, if not a logically consistent, whole”. Repetition ensures the successful articulations of certain understandings, whereby “these linguistic elements come to seem as though they are inherently or necessarily connected, and the meanings they produce come to seem natural, come to seem an accurate description of reality” (Weldes, 1999: 99). The EU has articulated and rearticulated its identity as “security provider” over time, which underlines the ongoing search for ontological security in the international arena.

### **The EU Global Strategy (2016)**

The EUGS was officially presented against a problematic European political background, which the document itself depicted as “times of existential crisis, within and beyond” the Union (EUGS, 2016: 7). The British referendum to leave the EU was perhaps an unexpected blow, but the wider European region had become more unstable and insecure for some time. Terrorist attacks on EU territory surged in 2015-2016, which highlighted that the EU was facing critical internal and external situations that could not be overlooked any longer. Critical situations are threats to ontological security and identity narratives because they disturb the “institutionalized routines” of actors (Steele, 2008: 12). These crises had severely undermined the credibility of the EU’s identity as security provider, both within and outside its borders.

Thus, great expectations were placed on the EUGS. The document needed to reinforce the EU’s ontological security since, as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – Federica Mogherini - declared, it was “precisely at such times of crisis that signalling European unity is (...) a due act of political responsibility” (Tocci, 2016: 470). The EUGS embodied a revised vision intended to maintain the Union’s identity as security provider, by adapting the narratives to reflect the changes in the security context. The concept of “resilience” played an important function in this respect, being fluid enough to encompass a wide range of initiatives and at the same time address to some extent the disappointing aftermath of the ESS – the failure to effectively promote long term democratic values in the neighbouring areas. Even so, the endeavour to reinforce the EU’s ontological security has remained only partially successful, because the discursive move temporarily gives credibility to the EU’s identity narrative and has not surpassed the underlying problems of EU external actions.

Foreign policy strategies do not emerge in a socio-economic vacuum, as they are the “product of the intersection between domestic politics and the international environment” (Grevi, 2016: 1). This aspect has been particularly relevant in the case of the EUGS, a document which aims to bridge the gap between inside and outside policy directions. To implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and respond to challenges like migration, the EUGS (2016: 11) has proposed the idea of a “joined-up

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Union” that shows unity and coherence across “external policies, between Member States and EU institutions, and between the internal and external dimensions of our policies”. The text also talks about adopting an “integrated approach to conflicts”, considering that “[s]ustainable peace can only be achieved through comprehensive agreements rooted in broad, deep and durable regional and international partnerships” (EUGS, 2016: 9-10).

Working towards a “joined-up” EU has been a longstanding goal, yet its fulfilment is highly pressing in the current context, when “[i]nternal and external security are ever more intertwined” and “security at home entails a parallel interest in peace in our neighbouring and surrounding regions” (EUGS, 2016: 14). In an increasingly interdependent world, instability in the European vicinity and conflicts in the Middle East and Africa influence severely security and development inside the EU, by producing spill-over phenomena such as migration, transnational crime and terrorism. Connecting the internal and foreign security policies is “a necessity for countering these spill-over effects” (Zandee, 2016: 1). That is why the EUGS (2016: 18-19) first looks “at home” to efficiently deal with “terrorism, hybrid threats, climate change, economic volatility and energy insecurity”. Then the EU intends to “take responsibility foremost in Europe and its surrounding regions, while pursuing targeted engagement further afield” (EUGS, 2016: 17).

The shift in discourse, which effectively narrows the scope of EU security policies, has not escaped scholarly attention. Some have regarded it as a “soberer self-evaluation”, when comparing EU influence to that of traditional security actors like the US and NATO (Mälksoo, 2016: 382). Others have considered it “a continuum”, in which “what changes is the spectrum, or intensity, of Europe’s responsibility and engagement”, whereas the EU remains “a multi-regional power with global presence and outreach” (Grevi, 2016: 6). The optimists view EU member states as simultaneously preparing to act like “full-fledged partners and security providers” in the extended neighbourhood, playing a “selective and non-principal role in regional geopolitics and security affairs” and “investing in global governance” (Grevi, 2016: 6).

However, by adopting an ontological security perspective, the discourse shows that the EU’s identity has been redefined within a specific narrative, which tries to render it more credible among prominent international players like the US. The US as a security actor have historically undergone periods of isolationism or selective involvement in international affairs, as well as times of unilateral interventionism (the 2003 Iraq war). By contrast, the EU aims for a balanced identity and international role, taking into account past criticism that it had an unrealistic agenda on achieving many of its foreign policy and security goals. The famous “capability-expectations gap” (Hill, 1993) has been somewhat addressed in the EUGS, which contains a more grounded vision for the security provider identity, stemming “as much from a realistic assessment of the strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world” (EUGS, 2016: 16).

The new guiding approach for EU external action has been called “principled pragmatism”, a middle ground “between the Scylla of isolationism and the Charybdis of rash interventionism” (EUGS, 2016: 16). In International Relations terminology, principled pragmatism is “Realpolitik with European characteristics” (Biscop, 2016a). It does not refer to the Machiavellian version with the end justifying the means, rather a return to the original sense that rejected liberal utopianism and not liberal ideals. The original interpretation of Realpolitik “held out a vision of the future and a guide for how to get there” or attempted to implement ideals in a realistic manner (Bew in Biscop, 2016a: 1).

Moreover, the discourse suggests that the EU's redefined identity as security provider could empirically base itself in economic diplomacy. Commissioner Mogherini made a series of comments in the foreword to the EUGS (2016: 3) - "Our diplomatic network runs wide and deep in all corners of the globe. Economically, we are in the world's G3. We are the first trading partner and the first foreign investor for almost every country in the globe. Together we invest more in development cooperation than the rest of the world combined. It is also clear, though, that we are not making full use of this potential yet".

Economic diplomacy features among the EU's foreign policy tools; for example, negotiating access to the internal market, economic regulatory influence at international level and the extensive sanctions regime against Russia. It would be sensible to expand and improve a mechanism that is already in place. Unfortunately, the main body of the EUGS did not explain how the potential of economic diplomacy mentioned by commissioner Mogherini could be further developed. The EUGS has instead put forward "a more expansive and noticeably more smart power-oriented approach - a combination of both hard and soft power" (Davis Cross, 2016: 403).

Overall, the changes in EU discourse and scope of security policies were long overdue to reflect the complicated international security context, especially in the Eastern vicinity with its more or less frozen conflicts around the Black Sea – Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. The ESS had stressed the promotion of stability and democracy, but the EU registered a problematic track record in stabilizing, let alone democratizing, the surrounding regions (Smith, 2017: 278). Ontological security requires consistency and international recognition for the identity narratives, hence the need to counteract the quite disappointing outcomes of the EU foreign and security policies until the present.

The EUGS has transitioned from promoting stability and democratic principles to the concept of "resilience", defined as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EUGS, 2016: 23). Resilience plays a significant function in the discursive efforts to render the EU's security provider identity more credible and at least somewhat supported by concrete results. It is meant to be "a broader concept, encompassing all individuals and the whole of society (...) featuring democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable development" (EUGS, 2016: 24). The term "resilience" has become increasingly popular in EU documents – the 2012 EU Approach to Resilience, the 2013 EU Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries and the 2014 Resilience Marker, as well as with a range of international actors.

Compared to previous foreign policy strategies, the EUGS has underlined state and societal resilience in the surrounding regions as a second priority after domestic security (Tiilikainen, 2016: 4-5). The notion's presence in the EUGS has been welcome by some policy analysts and academics, since it arguably overcomes "the inconclusive and eventually counterproductive argument about the balance between stability and democracy" (Ülgen, 2016). In relations with its neighbouring states, the EU has often been accused of indirectly promoting stability over democracy by maintaining trade operations and financial assistance, despite a regime's questionable democratic standards. This generated a never ending discussion about migration concerns and how the EU needed to prevent further regional instability and foster economic growth, otherwise its internal prosperity and security would be directly impacted.

Resilience has been interpreted as moving away from the "transformative agenda" based on the propagation of democratic values, which assumed that all states in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) truly wanted change; it can be argued that the

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mostly absent willingness to reform contributed to the inefficiency of the ENP in certain states like Algeria, Belarus, Egypt and Moldova (Techau, 2016). While the EUGS (2016: 9) seems to retain faith in the ENP's "enduring power of attraction" that "can spur transformation", the strategy has placed an emphasis on building "paths to resilience" in "countries within and beyond the ENP". The EUGS take on resilience involves supporting "the conditions and capacity for sustainable, endogenous political processes and economic development" (Grevi, 2016: 7).

Still, what does resilience actually mean and why has it been increasingly popular in EU documents? The literature on security employs the term to illustrate the reactive capacity to harm and "the underlying ability to endure disaster", ranging from natural ones to acts of terrorism and global financial instability (Bendiek, 2016: 2). Resilience reflects the profound change in contemporary security risks and challenges, which are "characterized by complex interdependencies, transcendence of geographical as well as disciplinary boundaries, and the complete absence of straightforward solutions" (Wagner, Anholt, 2016: 418). Crises such as those in Ukraine, Syria, Libya and the failure of post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan drastically affected the optimism of the ESS. Terrorist attacks on EU territory have also proliferated, targeting Brussels itself.

Against such a difficult security background, resilience constituted for EU policy makers "a perfect middle ground between over-ambitious liberal peace-building and the under-ambitious objective of stability" (Wagner, Anholt, 2016: 417). The ambiguity of resilience contributed to it being universally accepted or at least uncontested. Stakeholders with different perspectives agreed on using this concept due to its fluid meanings. Resilience can be understood as "a call for more defence spending, or as an upgrade of development policy within a comprehensive, 'joined up' approach, or as a move away from liberal peace-building" (Wagner, Anholt, 2016: 417-418). But the same fluid understandings have resulted in two vulnerabilities indicated by the academic literature: lack of conceptual clarity and applicability parameters.

Resilience is seen as a "catchword", whose incoherence and ambiguity could take for granted severe issues and not try to uncover their causes or find effective, long-term solutions (Smith, 2016: 451). Equally problematic is the practical application of the notion due to its wide reach – state and society, where there are no specified objectives and "every bit of EU action (...) can be claimed to serve the cause of resilience" (Ülgen, 2016). That is why resilience risks eventually becoming an obsolete "alternative to [democratic] transformative approaches" (Steinhilber in Bendiek, 2016: 2). Or even worse, resilience could be treated as justification "for the limits of international intervention, ideologically reifying the limits to transformation as internal products" of societies (Chandler in Wagner, Anholt, 2016: 421).

In June 2017, a report was issued about the progress of implementation regarding the EUGS after one year. On that occasion, the EU interpretation of the term "resilience" was clarified as follows: "The European Union adopts a transformational approach to resilience, aimed at protecting rights, building political participation, fostering sustainable development and security. We aim to do so in a manner that enables states and societies to withstand, adapt, recover and respond to shocks and crises if and when they arise" (EUGS – Year 1, 2017: 14). Some of the conceptual ambiguity inherent in the notion has been dealt with, but it is too early to have an informed opinion about its practical application.

Thus far, the results reported by the first year review of the EUGS about state and societal resilience have targeted impact. A few examples include financial assistance for

Ukraine's reforms on corruption, public administration and judiciary; working with Libyan authorities to improve the living conditions of migrants; helping to provide education and professional training for Syrian refugee children and young people in Jordan and Lebanon; support for Tunisia's civil administration reform and contributing to stability in the Sahel region (EUGS – Year 1, 2017: 14-15). All are tangible and encouraging results obtained by an actor that is not yet "a strategic, unitary or autonomous player" (Arteaga, 2017: 3).

Nevertheless, resilience is not the long term solution to reinforcing the EU's ontological security. The concept has contributed to a more credible identity narrative as portrayed by the EUGS, without addressing the core problems of EU foreign and security policies. The EU's recognition as security provider largely depends on its development of shared military capabilities. Collective defence at the European level or the EU's "strategic autonomy" has been depicted as an "ambition" in the EUGS (2016: 4). Not a surprising choice of words since its fulfilment has been rendered even more complicated by the forthcoming Brexit, bearing in mind that the United Kingdom is one of the main military powers in the EU (Biscop, 2016b).

Resilience as a goal has only sidestepped the challenge faced by the EU, which is choosing between cooperation with undemocratic governments and the promotion of liberal ideals like human rights. In the eastern neighbourhood, there are two meaningful examples of this dilemma. EU officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the Erdoğan administration's escalating violation of democratic rights and liberties in Turkey after the failed coup (July 2016), yet EU-Turkish collaboration on shared interests such as fighting terrorism and controlling migration has taken precedence. The EU had signed a deal in March 2016 where Turkey was promised "aid, visa-free travel for its nationals and accelerated membership talks" in exchange for reducing the migratory influx (BBC, 2016). A non-binding vote by the European Parliament in November recommended suspending talks about Turkey's EU accession. President Erdoğan responded by threatening to open the borders for the migrant flow towards the EU, if things went any further (BBC, 2016). Turkey is aware of its prominent role in controlling migration and will use the advantageous position to the fullest, which leaves the EU in an uncomfortable situation with no guiding light from the concept of "resilience".

Similarly, Russia's aggressive foreign policy, which culminated in the occupation of Crimea (2014), remains a thorny topic. The EUGS (2016: 33) has acknowledged that "the relationship with Russia represents a key strategic challenge", which requires a "consistent and united approach" and "full respect for international law". The text mentions that the EU "will not recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea nor accept the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine", at the same time cooperating with Russia "if and when our interests overlap" (EUGS, 2016: 33). The EU has imposed economic sanctions on Russia, but it is difficult to maintain a consistent and united approach between member states "feeling the heat of Russia's assertiveness in the east and those wishing to reset the clock to pre-2014 normality" (Tocci, 2016: 468). There is also the incentive of Russian energy supply, which continues to be inescapable for many EU members as they are dependent on it. Unfortunately, the EU as a regional security provider has slim prospects to prevent Russia from destabilizing states in the near abroad, let alone actively help to compel Russia to retreat from Ukraine's territory.



### Conclusions

On a final note, there is an array of positive and negative aspects to take into account when analyzing the EUGS. The timely release of the strategy, following the official announcement of the British referendum decision to leave the EU, served as a proclamation of European unity for the present and foreseeable future. It was a good political tactic, forestalling “much of the sharply critical ‘end of Europe’ rhetoric”, which tends to be popular in the international media (Davis Cross, 2016: 405). The EUGS also represents a policy statement rich in identity narratives, intentions and potential, yet only time can tell how successful and durable their application will be in practice. The much anticipated concrete results of the EU foreign and security policies depend on many factors, since the EU’s nature as a political actor limits the clarity of goals, set timeframes and methodological approaches that can be adopted, compared to national strategies (Arteaga, 2017: 3).

Even so, this article has been particularly concerned with how the EU’s identity as security provider has been rearticulated in the EUGS. It has employed a conceptual perspective and methodology based on ontological security and discourse analysis, which draws from three socio-psychological insights about identity and discourse: states and international organizations treated as subjects; identity as the product of socio-cognitive processes of self-identification and categorization; the relationship between identity and discourse as conceptualized by the mechanism of articulation. Ontological security relies on identity narratives being consistent over time and space and being affirmed by other international actors. External recognition also stems from how credible those identity narratives actually are and whether the empirical reality confirms them or not.

By using an ontological security viewpoint, the EUGS emerges as a key document that shows the reconfiguration of EU identity within specific parameters, whose main purpose is to render the identity narratives more grounded. The EU as security provider has constructed a balanced vision, which distinguishes it from traditional security agents like the US who have alternatively undergone periods of isolationism, selective involvement and unilateral interventionism in global affairs. The EU needs to represent a different type of security provider, because it ultimately has very limited shared military capabilities compared to the US. That is why the EU aims for a realistic approach to security policies, in an attempt to counteract the failed expectations of the ESS and the disappointing outcomes of its external actions, especially in the eastern vicinity.

Furthermore, the international security context had changed substantially from 2003 to 2016, which had to be reflected in the EUGS. The strategy has advanced a redefined image about the EU’s external directives, with resilience as central pillar. The notion of resilience plays an important role in the discursive efforts to make the EU’s security provider identity more credible and at least partly confirmed by tangible results. But the discursive shift from democracy promotion to resilience remains partially useful, since the fundamental issues and challenges of EU foreign and security policies have not been overcome. To conclude, the EUGS symbolizes a step forward in the right direction regarding the EU’s security agenda, with lots more to be hopefully accomplished in the future.

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