Afghanistan: NATO’s Dilemma

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We must not - we cannot - become a two-tiered alliance of those who are willing to fight and those who are not. Such a development, with all its implications for collective security, would effectively destroy the Alliance.

- US Defense Secretary Robert Gates speaking on NATO in Afghanistan at the 2008 Munich Security Conference

**INTRODUCTION**

On the 60th year of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s founding, Afghanistan provides a unique opportunity for the alliance to demonstrate its credibility as a ‘new NATO’. In its first real ‘out-of-area’ operation, NATO has a chance to prove its strength to operate beyond Europe and combat global security threats from terrorism and instability. But despite proving its early critics such as John Mearsheimer wrong during the 1990s, NATO’s credibility is once again on the line – Afghanistan is proving to be a difficult test of the alliance’s political will and military capabilities. NATO’s mission – the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) - has been marred by a lack of collective action amongst its 28 member states and led new critics to claim that NATO has been ‘pushed to the edge of collapse’ in yet another crisis. Analysts have pointed out to the stark disparity in ISAF troop contribution and financial commitment amongst member states as illustrative of the uneven burden sharing and proof of a lack of collective effort in stabilizing Afghanistan. In this paper, I will ask the question: why does the NATO face a problem of weak collective action in Afghanistan? In answering my own query, I will argue that the weakness of collective action in Afghanistan arises from NATO’s failure to develop specific assets to deal with the unique security challenges it faces in Afghanistan. In particular, I will show that strategic ambiguity over mission objectives, a divided military command, absence of uniform funding channels and problematic civilian assets combine to raise costs without tangible benefits for

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2. Article 6 of the Charter applies NATO’s collective defense to territories of ‘the Parties in Europe or North America…to the islands under the jurisdiction of any Party in the North Atlantic area north of Tropic of Cancer’; what lies beyond the confines of this definition ‘out-of-area operation’. Afghanistan falls into this latter category.
3. Writing in 1990, John Mearsheimer had predicted that ‘without a common Soviet threat or an American night watchman’, a transatlantic institution such as the NATO would lose its raison-d’être and dissolve. John Mearsheimer, “Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War,” in Richard Betts, ed., Conflict After the Cold War, (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 22.
4. Mark Webber and James Sperling, “NATO: from Kosovo to Kabul,” in International Affairs 85:3 (2009), 491.
contributing members and impedes collective action within NATO in the ISAF mission.

Free-Riding: Evidence from the Ground

It is important to recognize that in spite of two waves of expansion and a changing security environment, the notion of shared risk and responsibility remains a ‘founding principle of the Alliance.’ And yet the ISAF mission presents a classic case of collective action problem for the alliance. This problem is best viewed in the context of burden-sharing which Peter Forster and Steven Cimbala define as “the distribution of costs and risks among members of a group in the process of accomplishing a common goal.” Mark Webber and James Sperling show that in 2008, the United States provided 44 percent, United Kingdom 17 percent and Netherlands 4 percent of total troops to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, while others such as Norway (0.9 percent), Belgium (0.8 percent) and Portugal (0.1 percent) fell short of their share of contribution, creating a case of ‘asymmetrical burden sharing’. This disparity is true for multilateral aid contribution to Afghanistan too: while Netherlands contributed nearly 12 percent of total financial assistance between 2002 and 2008, France shared less than 2 percent of the aid commitment.

Such disparities reflect a choice of ‘selective commitment’ by certain member states. Joel Hillison highlights such behavior - the inadequate contribution to attainment of the common goal - as evidence of free riding by NATO member states such as Norway and Belgium amongst others. The interdependency of military operations in Afghanistan with civilian tasks of policing and economic reconstruction requires financial and logistical contribution along with military assets; as not all member states contribute in these areas towards NATO’s goal of stabilization and reconstruction, free-riding by some proves costly for the alliance as a whole.

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5 In 1999, NATO asked three new members were asked to join the alliance (the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland). In 2004, seven additional members joined the alliance (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia).
6 In NATO’s 2007 Parliamentary Report, only six NATO members were at or above the benchmark of military expenditure ‘at 2 percent of GDP’ standard: Bulgaria, France, Greece, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Peter Forster and Steven Cimbala, The U.S., NATO, and Burden-Sharing, (London: Routledge, 2005), 164.
7 Webber and Sperling, 504.
10 It is important to note that this uneven burden sharing is not so much a transatlantic issue but rather an intra-European problem – along with the United States, several European states have been engaging in high risk and high cost missions as part of the ISAF but another set of European states opt out of their commitment in Afghanistan. Regardless, such a ‘two-tiered’ status of the Afghanistan mission is highly problematic, especially in context of the growing Taliban insurgency and a severe crisis of confidence in the Kabul government. Stanley McChrystal, “Commander’s Initial Assessment”, International Security Assistance Force Headquarters – Afghanistan, August 2009.
Mancur Olson, in examining collective action, argues that in a group setting “unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests.”  

Despite its current size (with 28 member states), NATO does not appear to be facing institutional problems typically associated with a large scale; Celeste Wallander attributes this to the presence of ‘general assets’ within the alliance. These include the formal bodies such as North Atlantic Council (NAC), Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) as well as the civilian staff, communication channels and a common economic infrastructure: for Wallander, these assets facilitate communication, coordination and eventually consensus building and in the process, lower costs of transaction on security issues for each member state.

Hence, what Olson refers to as the ‘other special device’ is the remaining factor which can explain collective action – or the lack thereof - within the NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. Wallander labels these devices as ‘specific assets’ which “facilitate particular transactions and confer efficiency gains.” She argues that in dealing with different sources of instability and threats, alliances need targeted institutional principles, practices and procedures to enable member states to mitigate the security concern. A military threat needs to be addressed with assets that allow the alliance to mount credible defense and if needed, combat capabilities; dealing with political instability requires assets for mediation and engagement while peacekeeping requires mobile ground forces, multinational command and police-like rules of engagement. For ISAF, it currently faces all of these challenges in Afghanistan: there is an acute security threat from the Taliban insurgency, a challenge of reconstructing the weak Afghan economy and it needs to be able to secure a stable and transparent government. As Wallander argues, a responsive institution ensures collective action by addressing these diverse mission needs through constant adaptation and development of new specific assets. I will illustrate that in the manifested at two levels: (i) member states’ unanimous support for institutional declarations such as the Berlin Accord 2004, the Riga Declaration 2006 and the new Strategic Vision at Bucharest 2009 and (ii) commitment under Article 4 of the NATO charter that seeks to promote peace, stability and rule of law amongst states and now to its out-of area operations which includes Afghanistan.


13 Alternatively, constructivists such as Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnet, in understanding collective action, posit that member states in an alliance like NATO need to view security as a function of community - states have to share a common identity and perceive common meaning in operational missions if they are to act collectively. Deductively, the absence of these common perceptions gives rise to uneven commitment to alliance operations. However, I argue that, for ISAF, NATO member states readily share a common understanding of the serious threat from an unstable Afghanistan. This is

14 Wallander, 707.

15 Wallander, 710.
context of Afghanistan, NATO has failed to develop such a range of specific assets; its repertoire of general assets facilitate necessary cooperation in Brussels but are not sufficient to address the unique security demands in Kabul. The absence of specific instruments and mechanisms – namely strategic ambiguity, a divided military command, absence of an uniform funding structure and problematic civilian assets – limit the scope and raise costs of contribution to ISAF (such as exposure to combat risks and uncertainty in planning for long term objectives) without providing any discernible and immediate benefit to each member state. As a result, member states such as Belgium and Norway are disincentivized to contribute to the mission objectives which in turn lead to a complex collective action problem.

The Case of ISAF

Wallander shows that with out-of-area missions, NATO’s “mission-specific command structure needs to be as mobile as its forces.” For the ISAF, the failure to develop the specific assets in security and reconstruction operations means that such a responsive structure has not materialized across its five phases of operations since 2001.

Strategic Ambiguity

ISAF was originally created by UN Security Council Resolution 1386 in December 2001 with military responsibilities limited to Kabul. In 2003, it assumed full command of ISAF in Afghanistan from the US and by 2008, it was responsible for (i) providing law and order, (ii) promoting governance and development, (iii) helping reform the justice system and (iv) training an Afghan police force and army under UNSCR 1883. Within the alliance, NATO has attempted to adapt and internalize these evolving responsibilities by adopting new strategies and declarations: in the 2004 Berlin Agreement, NATO committed itself to ‘sufficiently constitute and (make) operational’ Afghan security forces while the 2008 Strategic Vision confirmed NATO’s ‘long term commitment’ to Afghanistan and shift to a ‘comprehensive civilian-military operations only in Kabul. The second phase was ISAF’s geographic expansion throughout Afghanistan completed in 2006. The final three phases would involve stabilization; transition; and redeployment. At the start of 2009, ISAF was operating in Phase III, “stabilization” and Phase IV, the “transition” of security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) may follow soon. Belkin and Morelli, 9.

The fast changing environment in Afghanistan requires ISAF to cope with threats that arise from well organized militants, drug lords as well as splinter local groups and governance challenges require balancing local *loya jirgas* and national government agencies. To that end, specific assets pose a dilemma for ISAF; once developed and utilized successfully, the specific assets lose their usefulness and operational mobility necessitates new specific assets to be deployed.

16 Well-developed specific assets have been attributed for NATO’s success in previous missions. The creation of a new planning staff at SHAPE and a Crisis Coordination Center in Brussels in 1994 allowed for a planned and swift deployment of a joint task force in Kosovo as the crisis there escalated in 1999. Wallander, 718.

17 Wallander, 719.

18 NATO planned that ISAF operations in Afghanistan would have five phases. The first phase was “assessment and preparation”, including initial
approach’ while increasingly engaging with neighbors, ‘especially Pakistan.’

The problem with the ISAF strategy papers is that these represent mostly ‘consensus documents’ and lack detailed expectations or commitment pledges for each member state (or the means of following up on these). Julianne Smith and Michael Williams label this as NATO’s ‘lack of a roadmap’. 22

Institutional ambiguity about the scope and objective of the ISAF mission, most importantly at the tactical level, reflects failure on NATO’s part to develop a specific asset that can continually define its mission statement. This infuses uncertainty for each member state, making it difficult to plan for long term military and financial contributions and raises the opportunity cost of commitment. For instance, shortly after the 2004 Berlin Agreement, when the US requested ISAF members to assume selected counter-insurgency responsibilities [originally conducted as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)], some NATO states balked and cited that, despite their Berlin commitments, combat operations were the purview of the US-led OEF and the preceding UN Resolution required ISAF to engage in stabilization operations only. 23 With mission statements lacking clarity and defined responsibilities for contributing states, NATO members have no incentive to engage in riskier operations of counter-insurgency and are rather incentivized to free-ride in the complex security environment.

Similarly, a 2008 NATO Parliamentary Report cited that several nation states, including Italy and Spain, hold strong to the belief that “the formal responsibilities of the Alliance itself have always centered almost exclusively on one area: the provision of a safe and secure environment.” The report continues to state that these states feel that NATO should not have the lead in providing for democratic development, agricultural reform, or literacy programs, which “more appropriately fall under the responsibility of other organizations and agencies.” 24 The German Defense Minister went as far as asserting that, “(Even) this (counter-insurgency) is not what the NATO is supposed to do.” 25 This is problematic in the context of the challenges faced in Afghanistan: stabilization efforts need to be preceded by mitigation of threats from the Taliban insurgency and specific assets, in this case institutional guidelines, are necessary to motivate states to engage in the mission in a comprehensive manner, instead of making ‘selective commitments’.

Perhaps one of the most detrimental outcomes of this strategic ambiguity are the national caveats. As of 2008, there were as many as 62 caveats in place for the ISAF mission, which had a ‘direct negative impact’ on mission goals in Afghanistan. 26 Almost half of the

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23 Belkin and Morelli, 16.
25 Belkin and Morelli, 17.
26 As described by Commander of NATO’s Joint Forces Command Brunssum. Webber and Sperling, 509.
forces in ISAF have some form of caveats. These include ban on night-time operations, consultation with national governments, exclusion of specific operations (notably, counter insurgency) and even ban on fighting after a snowfall. The lack of a specific institutional guideline (that systematically outlines expectation from member states) means that ISAF ground commanders have had to shape and compromise their conduct of missions to fit the caveats of national troops - instead of member forces adapting to mission-specific requirements mandated by a clear strategy paper. For instance, Germany provides a large number of troops to stabilization efforts (nearly 9 percent), but imposes restrictions on where German troops can be deployed and on rules of engagement. In 2006, this led Germany to refuse requests by the US to redeploy to the unstable south-eastern region: absence of a well-developed strategic statement as a specific asset means that member states can opt for self-designed restrictions and consequently hamper the operational effectiveness of ISAF. National caveats forfeit NATO's inherent advantage over any adversary in Afghanistan through ISAF’s intelligence, speed, firepower, and other attributes, and therefore put NATO soldiers at higher risk and impose additional costs on contributing members, creating disincentives from acting collectively.

Absence of Centralized ISAF Budget

Despite possessing effective general assets, NATO's budget rules appear to perpetuate the inequity in burden sharing, more acutely in high cost and long-term missions such as the one in Afghanistan. When a member state agrees to deploy troops to a NATO operation, that nation is obligated to pay the costs associated with that deployment. Thus there is a built in disincentive for nations to agree to commit troops to a mission or increase the size of forces already deployed. This complicates efforts for ISAF, especially as additional costs have to be borne to counter the current Taliban offensive and the urgency to secure areas for civilian reconstruction projects to start. For many member states, this budgetary obligation imposes significant domestic opportunity costs: one, they have to allocate portions of their national budget towards ISAF and two, leaders of fragile governments or coalition governments often have to expend serious efforts to convince their legislatures and publics to support deployment and the associated costs. A specific asset – in this case, a common operational funding system – could have otherwise minimized the burden on certain member states with unique domestic political (and economic) conditions; reluctant states could have still committed troops while leaving costs of deployment to be funded by a commonly pooled budget.

Smith and Williams labels the approach of the current funding system as one based on ‘costs lie where they

27 Belkin and Morelli, 22.
This system deters nations from going ‘first in’ for a given operation since they have to bear the high costs of establishing the very facilities to start up in a new theater. For Latvia and Estonia amongst other smaller member states, this is particularly problematic: these start-up expenses are prohibitively high and despite their political willingness to contribute, they are disincentivized to take the lead on establishing new mission bases. During Phases I and II, this left the larger member states with the burden of setting up most facilities as ISAF expanded geographically through Afghanistan. Additionally, these ‘entry costs’ (even if borne by a willing ‘first in’ member state) arguably leads to reluctance by states to redeploy to a different theater as they become unwilling to leave behind the facilities they originally funded and constructed, often tailored to specific requirement of their national forces. This may partly explain the long time hesitance of Germany to redeploy part of its 3000-member troop contingent to southern Afghanistan despite continued requests by the US and the UK. Having established facilities in northern Afghanistan since the early stages of the ISAF, Germany had no incentive to volunteer or accept request by allies to undertake new operations in the more volatile areas, which could have otherwise benefitted from efforts of a well trained and experienced German contingent. Hence, the absence of common ISAF funding means that states are likely to decide on commitments unilaterally and complicate opportunities to act collectively.

### Problematic Military Assets

A major challenge facing the ISAF in Phase III, Stabilization, has been the inadequate military assets in place, namely a divided military command, a problematic troop rotation system and lack of mission-specific military hardware. The absence or poor quality of specific military assets on the ground in Afghanistan means that contributing member states such as Spain and Portugal, weary of domestic public backlash, have weak incentives to opt into military deployment in high-risk areas while others such as the US and the UK are left exposed to casualties in the unstable south-eastern regions. In other words, the inadequate military assets raise opportunity costs for contributing member states and force them to contemplate alternative strategies – ones with restricted commitments.  

The absence of an integrated military command can be best seen in the relationship between ISAF headquarters and the Regional Commands. For instance, in RC-South the major troop contributors – the UK, Canada, the Netherlands – are strong partners relatively unconstrained by caveats. But as ISAF officials note, RC-South effectively includes “four provincially-based national campaigns – Dutch, British, Canadian, and U.S. – based on the provinces in which their

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30 Smith and Williams, 5.
respective troops are deployed.” Each of these ISAF countries, in turn, tends to lobby the relevant Afghan Ministers in Kabul for assistance to “its” province. This arguably raises the costs of implementing a security project as each NATO member state, instead of coordinating, expends efforts to work through individual connections and ends up competing for the same resources instead of pooling these. This problem of an inadequately integrated military command is complicated by the problematic information flow among ISAF participants. In a Congressional Report on the ISAF mission, Catherine Dale presents evidence that senior U.S. officials at the mission HQ in Kabul have “a much clearer operational picture of eastern and southern Afghanistan”, that is regions where most U.S. forces operate, than of northern and western Afghanistan. Varied communications channels, linguistic barriers, and often reluctance on part of some countries to share information represent constraints on information flow, both at a national and NATO level. In a volatile security environment where coordination and timely information is key to combat insurgents, such inadequate military communication assets can – and does – lead to tactical errors and expose troops to fatal risks that could be avoided otherwise.

Secondly, ISAF has failed to develop an effective and uniform troop rotation system – a specific military asset that could have otherwise distributed the cost of troop deployment amongst member states and allowed for a more equitable sharing of the military burden. In the context of Afghanistan, a mission which requires close cooperation with local Afghans as part of a larger military strategy, troops need at least four to five months to build necessary relationships with local forces and knowledge of the terrain in order to be effective. However, NATO member states have varied deployment schedules, anywhere between 4 and 6 months which leave little time for troops to acclimatize to their environment and start undertaking operations. Analysts have suggested that a rotation of 12-15 months is necessary to let troops function effectively on the ground; in the absence of such an uniform rotation system, ISAF is left with a high turnover of personnel who do not retain any operational experience or knowledge and each member state has to bear the additional cost of training and adapting a new unit at every cycle of deployment.

Finally, the lack of adequate military hardware for ISAF troops once again reflects on the failure to develop specific military assets, particularly important for the rugged terrain and challenging conditions of fighting in Afghanistan. The NATO Parliamentary Report 2008 explains that the absence of aviation assets such as strategic lift to get to the battlefield, helicopter suited to perform in demanding terrain and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) which can provide critical battlefield intelligence, are critically impeding ISAF’s ability to deploy troops.

34 Dale, 15.
multilaterally equipped with mission-specific hardware. \(^{36}\) Added to this, the absence of an ISAF rapid response force means that soldiers and civilian personnel cannot be fast evacuated when under fire, as witnessed during a 2006 deadly attack on a Norwegian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). \(^{37}\) As rational actors, faced with the prospect of incurring casualties in combat operations while equipped with ineffective hardware or backup support, member states are motivated to limit contribution to the mission, especially for counter-insurgency efforts.

**Inadequate Civilian Assets**

In a multidimensional security environment where civilian reconstruction efforts are as critical as military successes, especially during the stabilization and transitional phases, ISAF’s difficulties have been complicated by the poor quality of civilian assets at its disposal. Perhaps the most notable civilian asset developed by the ISAF is its PRTs: these are civilian-military units assigned to work with Afghan provincial-level officials to provide and promote governance, development and security. And yet, owing to their structures, these PRTs face serious challenges, deterring many member states from contributing to PRT-based operations. A total of 26 PRTs are in place led by 14 different nations, each run using an unique national approach. \(^{38}\) Officially, the military component of each PRT falls under ISAF command; however, there is no established modus operandi (or overall concept of operations), many are dominated by military forces rather than civilian technicians and prefer reporting directly to their national representatives than the ISAF Headquarters. \(^{39}\) As a result, there is little coordination amongst the PRTs and no scope for exchanging information on best practices. For instance, the Netherlands channels funding for PRTs directly to the Afghan government instead of through the ISAF mission as it deems that the latter must take responsibility for planning and implementation of projects. In contrast, the US government controls the funds for PRTs itself but for the very opposite reason: it is apprehensive of corrupt Afghan officials misusing the funds and prefers to exercise direct overview of its PRTs. \(^{40}\) Without a uniform ISAF approach for the PRTs, each member state operate these teams at will, perceive the effectiveness of these civilian assets differently and hence contribute in varying scale and in the process frustrates Afghan, UN and other partners in their efforts to apply resources strategically and effectively.

In addition, some states such as Germany are weary that in some areas, civilian relief organizations should not be too closely associated with the military forces assigned to the PRTs since they feel that “their own security and perceived neutrality is endangered.” \(^{41}\) As a result, many European member states do not provide for an optimum number of civilian and military personnel in their

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\(^{37}\) Belkin and Morelli, 22.


\(^{39}\) Belkin and Morelli, 14.

\(^{40}\) Belkin and Morelli, 13.

\(^{41}\) Belkin and Morelli, 12.
respective PRTs (in addition to being minimally funded, as shown in the Netherlands case) and are hesitant to engage with the Afghan population. Some states, notably France, have even refused to lead a PRT and questioned the NATO’s role in operating these reconstruction teams. For what could have been an impactful civilian asset as part of the ISAF’s comprehensive civilian-military approach in Afghanistan, the PRTs have been marred by operational deficiencies and differences and limit the channels for member states to contribute through.

It is important to note the ISAF has witnessed the positive impact of an effective civilian asset in another instrument it has developed for itself since Phase III, albeit on a minimal scale: the Operational Mentoring Liaison Teams (OMLTs). These are teams which support the Afghan National Army (ANA) deployments and coordinate between ISAF and ANA to provide critical Allied support such as medical evacuation. While OMLTs may not be a purely civilian asset, there is much that the ISAF can learn from the OMLT structure to strengthen its repertoire of assets in Afghanistan. These teams are comprised of 12-19 personnel, a small size that ensures mobility and are deployed for at least six months in each theater to build strong relationships with the ANA and maximize mentoring effort. 42 Moreover, there are specific objectives that each OMLT is assigned with along with a tactical guideline that allows for incorporation of feedback from local Afghan units – such strategic clarity combined with flexibility have allowed the OMLTs to concentrate on training ANA forces on the ground while fostering strong connections with Afghans, in this case ANA soldiers. While France has largely led the OMLT-based efforts and there is still a shortfall of the recommended 59 units till date, the OMLTs provide example of a well-developed asset that the ISAF can emulate. The OMLT model - with institutionalized guidelines, responsiveness to changing security needs and an optimum size that facilitates close interaction with locals – allows for an asset to be effective in achieving specific security or reconstruction goals. Such assets in turn provide a channel for NATO member states to contribute into the ISAF mission, especially for those who opt to support reconstruction efforts and avoid military engagement, either due to logistical inability or a lack of political willingness.

CONCLUSION

Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier had suggested that NATO should be expanded to include partners outside Europe in a bid to become a ‘global NATO’. 43 And yet those aspirations seem premature before the alliance completes its mission in Afghanistan – and does so successfully. The multidimensional challenges in Afghanistan raise questions whether NATO is capable of redefining itself as a security alliance capable of committing beyond Europe. However, despite these current shortcomings, it is


43 Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, “Global NATO,” in Foreign Affairs. 85.5, 2006.
important to remember this is not the first time that the NATO has faced such a challenge. Similar critiques were put forth at the end of the Cold War but NATO successfully proved its worth by engaging in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s. Success there was largely attributable to its ability to develop specific assets to address the unique security needs of the operations. And if the alliance is to stabilize Afghanistan, it needs to do the same. That is the only way NATO can draw equitable military and financial commitment from its member states and sustain the collective action that is an absolute necessity in winning the complex war in Afghanistan.

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