Pensando lo imposible[1]: Why Mexico Should Be the Next New Member of the North Atlantic

Introduction

In this article, I broach a policy issue that is unusual, or even impossible to conceive. I sketch out a case for Mexico's being considered a candidate for membership in the North American Treaty Organization (NATO). The argument rests upon the alliance not so much as a collective-defense organization, because in this respect Mexico has as little need of NATO as NATO has of Mexico. It is NATO's political rather than its military dimension, especially with respect to what has come to be regarded as "security sector reform" (SSR) that provides the justification for contemplating Mexican membership. I am under no illusion about the current "marketability" of the argument that unfolds in these pages: If there are any voices—in Europe or North America—being raised on behalf of the policy idea I introduce, I have not heard them. I develop the idea in stages, the first three of which mention Mexico mostly in passing, as they are mainly concerned with the current "problem" in transatlantic relations (getting Washington to take the Europeans as seriously as they wish to be taken); the theoretical and policy debates over what NATO's purpose should be, with the Cold War receding into the distant past; and the meaning and promise of SSR as promoted through the enlargement of the alliance. I then bring Mexico more fully into the picture in the two following sections, first asking whether it could qualify for NATO membership and then discussing a set of "interests" that Mexico, its North American partners, and the European allies might have with respect to the membership question.

A Question of "Relevance"

A geopolitical paradox seems to have worked its way into transatlantic relations in the past few years. It can be stated in the following manner: Some European countries (France in particular) have become more "relevant" factors in the foreign policy of North America—or at least of the two North American countries who have been actively involved in European security for the past several decades: the United States and Canada. At the same time, Europe has become a less-relevant strategic actor. In addition to this central paradox associ-

States (Volker, 2010). Nearly the opposite, for this president is not averse to being known as the United States' first "Pacific" president, and his administration makes it clear that the country's most important challenges, and perhaps its most important interests as well, are to be found elsewhere than in Europe.

Notes one student of transatlantic relations, the story today is one of "unrequited love" (the Europeans' for Obama) and the continuing shift of wealth and power toward Asia, with the result being that, "For the first time in centuries Europe is no longer history's leading lady" (Greenway, 2010), and though no one in Canada talks of Stephen Harper as being Canada's first "Pacific" prime minister, there can be no mistaking the growing place of that region in Canada's overall grand strategy, including the economic aspects thereof, as well as the increasing Asian demographic presence in Canada, given that the continent now provides more than half of the country's total annual immigration intake (Yu, 2009).

This does not mean that dire scenarios of transatlantic rupture are waiting to unfold, because there are still many reasons for countries on either side of the Atlantic to wish to work more closely together, the mooted "rise" of China being one of these (on the assumption that China represents a threat to shared transatlantic interests). Yet for Canada and the United States, there is a sense that the Europeans have not been "missing any opportunity to miss an opportunity" to make of the old continent a more-viable strategic actor. The qualifier, "strategic," is important, for economically, no one questions that Europe possesses and wields a considerable degree of heft—notwithstanding the current crisis triggered by the fears that Greece might default on, or restructure, its sovereign debt, to be followed by similar action elsewhere among the heavily indebted or otherwise financially troubled European PIIGS (the acronym given to a group of five European Union [EU] members: Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain).

When it comes to translating the EU's economic girth into the capacity to act as a coherent strategic entity, there seems always to be an inverse relationship between Europe's economic presence and its geopolitical one. Some observers go

The Patten Challenge

North American countries do not share identical reasons for their current disenchantment with Europe's lack of geopolitical weight: Washington wants to see a growing European contribution to meeting global security challenges, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, whereas Canada (partly because it is getting set to end its own costly combat mission in Afghanistan) prefers to put the emphasis more on issues of "low" politics than of "high." In either country's case, there is a sense that Europe ' Europe should do more to become more "relevant" to them. In Europe, observers have not been blind to the sense that more is expected of the old continent; in Strasbourg in late April 2010, France's secretary of state for European affairs, Pierre Lellouche, bluntly acknowledged this when he complained to a group of reporters about the "continuous retreat of European influence" (Vinocur, 2010).

Long gone are the days when North Americans could explicitly style themselves as "producers" of security while Europeans were "consumers"; today, in both North American capitals, the expectation is that, as a geopolitical problem, Europe has been "solved" and that henceforth the question is not what the North American allies can do for Europe, but what North Americans and Europeans can do together to address whatever common challenges they might be capable of identifying—not necessarily an easy thing for them to accomplish. Recently, one seasoned European policy hand offered his own suggestions for redressing Europe's relevance gap. In an article originally published in the *e e e f B s* and subsequently reproduced as an op-ed in *e e*, Chris Patten, former EU commissioner of external relations, long-time British politician, and currently chancellor of the University of Oxford—in short, as much of a "Europeanist" as one is likely to find coming out of Britain (or almost any other European country, for that matter)—spelled out what Europe needs to do to get back onto the U.S. radar screen, as well as to begin to punch at its weight, if not above it.

The "Patten challenge" is primarily about Europe's becoming a more capable regional and even global partner of the United States and appears as a list of five policy recommendations. First, Europe should counter the military nuclearization of Iran and work to support democracy in Pakistan, as well as continue to

is, Mexico would certainly seem to be a geographical as well as strategic outlier, residing in that conceptual never-never land that in NATO parlance gets styled, "out of area." Besides, countries cannot be dragooned into the alliance; they have to want to join, and one would be hard-pressed to find enough Mexicans who have ever given serious thought to NATO to fill a small seminar room.

But let us suspend disbelief and simply treat the postulation of Mexico-in-NATO as a "thought experiment." At the very least, in probing why the prospect of Mexico's joining NATO may be tantamount to thinking the impossible, we might be able to shed some comparative light on two matters that are of immediate relevance to those interested in security relations between North America and Europe. The first concerns the nature and purposes of NATO in the two decades since the ending of the Cold War, and the second highlights some security challenges of a country that happens to be, apart from Canada, the only next-door neighbor of the world's number one power. Because of its geographical setting, Mexico shares with the United States a variety of economic and societal challenges, and to some in Washington, it even looms as the next great "failed state" on the U.S. security horizon. According to a study produced by the U.S. Joint Forces Command, there are two plausible, albeit worst-case, scenarios requiring policy consideration, and both concern an important U.S. partner turning into a "failed" state. One is Pakistan, and the other is Mexico, and with respect to the latter, the study's authors foresee that "any descent . . . into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone" (Debusmann, 2009).

Although the nightmare scenario of Mexico's "failing" looks highly unlikely, there can be no question that the United States' southern neighbor has been emerging increasingly as a security problem in a way not glimpsed since the Mexican Revolution during the early decades of the 20th century. Notes one of the best known of foreign correspondents from the United States, Thomas Friedman, "We take the Mexican-American relationship for granted. But with the drug wars in Mexico turning into Wild West shootouts on city streets and with our own immigration politics turning more heated, what's happening in Mexico has become much more critical to American foreign policy and merits more of our attention" (Friedman, 2010). It may not be Pakistan or Afghanistan, but Mexico is not showing signs of becoming the kind of country that is consistent with modern conceptions of regional zones of peace shared by cognate liberal democracies.

What I said above about Mexicans' attitudes toward NATO membership—namely that there is no policy advocacy for it—applies just as much to attitudes within NATO member-states: No one on either side of the Atlantic is plumping for Mexico's joining the alliance. Few would even mention Mexico and NATO in the same breath. That being said, my argument here does not really depend on any such advocacy being voiced. Nor should the apparent absurdity of Mexico's hypothetical adhesion to the alliance be grounds for cutting short the inquiry. It was not many years ago that the idea of Soviet allies someday

bership in the alliance. In short, let us weigh some pros and cons of a policy idea that, to date, simply has no constituency because it has never been articulated. As a backdrop to such a cost–benefit articulation, we need first to make a conceptual and theoretical detour through the post-Cold War decade's debate about what NATO should be "for" and how it might function as a central institution of international security.

What Should NATO Be "For"?

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, newly elected President John F. Kennedy challenged his fellow Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." We might paraphrase this enjoinment and apply it to NATO's predicament in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War's ending, a time when it very much appeared that the alliance needed to find an alternative means of sustaining ongoing relevance. Among the options bruited as a way to endow NATO with a new lease on life, and one of great centrality to the hypothetical matter of Mexican membership, was a concept that would come to be known as SSR. Regarding this emerging rubric, more than a few theorists and policy makers alike were beginning to ask in the early 1990s, "What can it do for NATO?"

Their curiosity was piqued at a moment when the alliance was casting about for new roles to replace a collective-defense mandate whose salience was rapidly diminishing. Into the yawning conceptual void would appear a new mandate of a sort, taking shape around the growing recognition that NATO might find a vocation in helping spread democratic practices throughout a part of Europe that had until then been considered "outside" of its area of interest and operations. In fairly quick order, the alliance would evolve a set of SSR norms that would manifest themselves as key guidelines for its partnership and enlargement programs. Admittedly, it would take until 1998 for the emerging concept finally to be baptized as SSR, in a policy address given by a member of Tony Blair's cabinet, Clare Short (Law, 2004). Nevertheless, the deeds that the name depicted had been becoming ever more widespread during the first few years of the post-Cold War decade, a time when NATO was acting more and more as a promoter of SSR, albeit doing so in the manner of Molière's *se* —doing something without exactly being able to name what it was doing.

SSR would evolve through two "generations" (Edmunds, 2002). The primary objective of the first was to ensure civilian control over the military in a variety of recent Soviet allies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), countries that the Western democracies would somehow need to embrace; at this time, SSR was virtually synonymous with "civil–military relations," and CEE countries such as Romania were among the earliest testing grounds for the concept (Yusufi, 2004, p. 16). The second generation witnessed a conceptual evolution, with SSR moving out of the civil–military orbit and increasingly concerning itself with assuring effectiveness in "governance" across a wide variety of sectors that might bear little relation to the military but did have a link with security broadly understood (especially the judiciary).

How NATO managed to insert itself into the new SSR world I cover in the

Although it would be a mistake to assume that a desire to enlarge the liberal-

logue and crisis management (NATO, 1995a, pp. 235–248). Within half a year of that meeting, the alliance would embark on a tentative journey into the world of peacekeeping. Alliance foreign ministers, meeting in ministerial session in early June 1992 in Oslo, announced their conditional willingness to assume peacekeeping assignments on a case-by-case basis under the responsibility of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). A year and a half later, dialogue would be given firmer institutional meaning through the launching of the Partnership for Peace (PfP). The two undertakings would embroil NATO in a new set of challenges and opportunities, as well as contribute to the gathering momentum of 1994 on the alliance's enlargement, the indispensable means by which NATO was eventually to establish its credentials in SSR.

There had been nothing in the first three years of the alliance's transformation dictating that dialogue or crisis management need result in, or even require, an expansion of its membership. When the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, announced the PfP at Travemünde, Germany, in October 1993, and when the alliance officially embraced it at the Brussels summit of January 1994, it was widely regarded as a means of putting off the issue of enlargement rather than making it an inevitability. More generally, there was nothing in the alliance's entire transformative quest that obliged it to take the decision to enlarge to the east.

To understand why enlargement would become by early 1995 the main issue within alliance councils would require more space than I have available here. Briefly, two member-states—Germany and the United States—each of which came to understand that it had an abiding "national interest" in NATO's growth, largely drove the expansion agenda. They were not the only states to urge NATO to resume a pattern of expansion well established during the Cold War, but they were out in front of the rest in shaping an alliance consensus on the issue, one that the contributions of theorists nourished. It was easy enough to understand why the Germans should desire an alliance presence in the former communist countries lying to the east of the Federal Republic's own "Río Oder" (Mesjasz, 1993, p. 32)—a presence that the defense minister, Volker Rühe, called for in the spring of 1993 in an important address to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and that the German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, who pithily declared that the "eastern border of Germany cannot forever remain the eastern border of NATO," reiterated the following winter (Kohl, 1994; Rühe, 1993).

What of U.S. interest in expanding NATO? We might almost say that U.S. interest in NATO's enlarging was "overdetermined," in the sense that numerous factors accounted for the decision of the Clinton administration to push ahead with the project. There were domestic ethnic interests to be considered, but their influence has been overstated given the broader geopolitical and ideological stakes involved. The United States wanted to preserve NATO as the premier institutional embodiment of its commitment to multilateralism; it wanted to bow

Ensuring that, in enlarging, NATO could secure these geopolitical and ideological objectives required careful consideration of conditions to be imposed on the aspirant membership of the alliance. It would be in the context of that consideration that the regulatory norms of SSR would first see the light of day. The principle of conditionality itself was easy enough to grasp: There were going to be some club dues extracted from the aspirants to membership, which in the first flush of enthusiasm about enlargement was a large group indeed, extending virtually to any "European" state that sought to join, including for a time even Russia. As Charles Pentland wrote apropos conditionality, "Notwithstanding the aura of technical novelty surrounding the term . . . the idea it expresses is as old as politics itself. It captures a bargaining relationship in which one party is in a position consistently to extract disproportionate concessions from another," resulting in the aspirants' being given an offer they "cannot refuse" (Pentland, 2000, p. 64).

The alliance's terms, which in retrospect we now understand to have been the first elaboration of its SSR norms, appeared in the "enlargement study" that was launched in late 1994, nearly a year after NATO leaders made the decision to embark on expansion. Between December 1994 and September 1995, NATO officials pondered how the alliance might increase its membership without at the same time decreasing its effectiveness as a regional security entity. How to do so without weakening the alliance? How to ensure that enlarging NATO contributed to unifying and not dividing Europe? The study's six chapters contained guidelines that were rather general, meaning that there could be no specific thresholds or criteria presented to potential members; this was to be a reality not only of the first post-Cold War round of enlargement, in which Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined, but also of the two subsequent rounds, which brought into the alliance fold Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Still, the study dropped some broad hints as to what NATO expected from any new member. At the very minimum, its military would have to be "interoperable" with that of existing members, which, in .4("inter)r0D[[(in)-40(r)d.4(m)0(o)-24swhich,

which effectively was what SSR was during the concept's first-generation stage. Whereas enlargement of NATO provided the context for the alliance's early successes in SSR, the partnership corollary of expansion itself played a key role. As John Barrett explains,

> In fact, an important element in new members' military contributions will be a commitment in good faith to pursue the objectives of standardization that are essential to alliance strategy and to achieve the minimum level of interoperability required for operational effectiveness. The study advises that new members should concentrate, in the first instance, on interoperability and accept NATO standardization doctrine and policies to help attain this goal. These standards will be based in part on conclusions reached through the PFP Planning and Review Process (PARP). The importance of these points is that they underscore both that the level of interoperability will be particularly relevant in demonstrating preparedness to join NATO and that the PARP will identify and effectively set the criteria in this regard. This is despite the fact that in all other areas the study resists defining fixed criteria. Thus, there is a fairly clear indication that interoperability will be an important first step in a country's advance preparations—at least on the military-technical level. (Barrett 1996, p. 98)[2]

NATO has very much functioned as a political organization, despite (or perhaps because of) its having come into existence mainly as a military organization dedicated to collective defense. With the ending of the ideological struggle against its erstwhile Soviet adversary, NATO began to figure centrally in the reform of the security sectors in a variety of newly emerging democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. It is in the context of SSR that a case can be made for Mexico's joining the alliance. Let us now turn to examining that case, fully cognizant of the reality that there has been absolutely no constituency, on either side of the ocean, in promoting Mexico's adhesion to the Atlantic alliance.

Is Mexico in NATO's "Area"?

We can begin responding with the apparent constraints that exist to make any Mexican membership in NATO virtually a moot point. Following a presentation of these constraints, I turn matters around and try to establish some reasons why Mexican membership might not be such an outlandish proposition. Let us start with what looks to be the highest barrier to any Mexican membership in the alliance: a "constitutional" prohibition on NATO's part that effectively bars from new membership any countries that do not happen to be physically located in Europe (with the stress being on *e* members, for the non-European signatories of the Washington treaty that established NATO in 1949—namely the United States, Canada, and Iceland—are all "grandfathered").

The alliance has expanded on a half-dozen occasions since 1949, respectively bringing in Greece and Turkey; the Federal Republic of Germany; Spain; Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria; and most recently, Albania and Croatia. All have been European nations, a fact that is only fitting because the Washington treaty's article 10 extends the welcome mat only to states located on that continent. The relevant passage comes in the first sentence of the article: "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European state in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede

to this Treaty" (NATO, 1995a, pp. 233–234). This restriction alone would seem to close the book on any further discussion of Mexico as a future NATO member were it not for one recent development within the alliance: the trend toward creatively interpreting the meaning of the geographical entity known as "Europe." In particular, the development has been associated with controversial discussions as to whether Ukraine and Georgia might be added to the ranks, now that the last two on the list of suitable invitees (Albania and Croatia) have joined. The controversy has swirled largely if not exclusively around the issue of Russian opposition to Ukrainian and Georgian membership, but in the case of Ukraine, at least it can be maintained that it fulfills the geographical criterion.

Things look different when it comes to Georgia, however. The geographical limits of Europe to the east are the Urals; to the southeast, they are the waters separating European Turkey from Asia Minor (the Bosporus, the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles), as well as the line formed by the highest summits of the Caucasus mountains (with lands to the north of that line being in Europe and to the south being in Asia). Save for a small and sparsely populated sliver of territory, Georgia lies entirely to the south of the geographical boundary separating Europe from Asia (i.e., its population resides, as does that of its fellow Caucasian republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, on Asian soil). In one respect it might be said to be like Turkey, "transcontinental." But Turkey's membership in NATO "Europe" has much less to do with its tiny landmass outside of Asia Minor and much more to do with the fact that Europe's largest city, Istanbul, happens to be in Turkey. Things are different with Georgia, meaning that, if

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the alliance's geographic epicenter is tenuous at best and in some cases non-existent. Sixteen allies can claim to have a coastline on the North Atlantic, interpreted to include the Baltic extension thereof: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Another four member states are clearly in Europe, but are landlocked: the Czech Republic,

Sarkozy, France's current president, recently reversed this act (Bozo, 2008). In the society of sovereign states, NATO allies are usually regarded as being among the most-favored participants, and part of that status flows simply from the fact of their membership in the world's most prestigious security club. If this is so, then Mexican prestige on the world stage could only be expected to increase pursuant to NATO membership.

Third, there is the more-important matter of where Mexico chooses to locate its geopolitical "identity": is it primarily a North American country, or is it a Latin American one? If Mexican elites should eventually decide that the country is more North American than anything else, and if there is to be some potential for converting what has been an apparent "regionalization" into something stronger, namely a regional identity, then it could be argued that being a member of the most important security organization to which its other two North American partners belong, NATO, would constitute a means of helping to "complete" Mexico as a North American country.[3]

What can we say of NATO members' interests in allowing Mexico to join? At the very least, they would find the idea more than a bit odd. Still, if Europeans believe NATO should continue to enlarge, they might prefer it to move southward in North America so as not to generate the controversy that expanding it eastward in Europe would stir up. Whatever else Moscow might think about NATO's adding Mexico to its ranks, it certainly could not claim that its security was being put at risk by such an expansion or that it was somehow being "encircled." This alone would allay the anxieties of the Germans and other European allies so eager not to upset Russia and should enable the allies to regard with equanimity NATO's hopping across the Río Grande, and though the Europeans tend to contemplate the alliance in a geographically egocentric way as being primarily "about" Europe, the reality is that, since its very inception, NATO's "area" of coverage has embraced more territory on the North American continent than on the European one. Adding Mexico would not upset a geographical balance that has been a constant feature of the alliance but rather would reconfirm the original balance as between North America and Europe.

There are the questions of cost and downside political risks associated with bringing Mexico into the fold. Since the entire point of the exercise would be to tap whatever SSR assets NATO (and perhaps the EU) might possess, adding

Reagan administration that looked uncharitably on Europeans meddling in what it considered the strategic "backyard" of the United States (Cirincione, 1985; Ledeen, 1985; Pierre, 1985). Such a competition would be unlikely to develop with respect to Mexico for several reasons, not the least of which is that the United States would not only tolerate, but would welcome the support of allies in Europe who evinced an interest in helping Mexico reform its judicial and constabulary organs. By showing support for Washington, the Europeans would go a considerable distance in muting U.S. criticisms of a Europe that did not "get it" when it came to responding to challenges elsewhere than on the old continent. Also, engaging in Mexico would provide an incentive for some European allies to reengage diplomatically with the alliance; one thinks in the first instance of Spain, which would almost certainly be designated the lead agent among the European allies for promoting the cause of Mexican membership.

As for the North American allies, Canada and the United States, what has been said about a North American regional identity for Mexico might also be said for them; should they increasingly interpret their geopolitical identity in terms of regional North American considerations (hardly a foregone conclusion, for Canada or the United States), then it would follow that a Mexico in NATO would be, for them, a better North American partner, one with whom it might become easier to resolve a variety of collective problems of an economic and political nature. Most important for the two North American NATO members, when they assess the implications of Mexico for their own security—an assessment that occupies U.S. attention more than it does Canadian—they tend to put a premium on potential reforms that could enable Mexico to overcome its chronic difficulties with state corruption, especially in the security area, including the law-enforcement and judicial systems. As one analyst recently put it, apropos SSR: "For the safety and prosperity of Mexico and the United States, Washington must go beyond its current focus on border control to a more ambitious goal: supporting Mexico's democracy" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 64).

To anyone from the United States or Canada, interest in Mexico as a member of NATO must depend on the alliance's being valued, south of the Río Grande at least, more for what it promises in the area of SSR and less for what it might provide to the collective defense of North America—at least as such defense has traditionally been imagined, as a response to great-power threat. It is unlikely that Mexico's public and political class would show itself any more disposed to collective defense in the future than it has in the past. Given Mexico's well-earned reputation for "isolationism," its interest in joining NATO can be compared, to take NATO's first round of enlargement after the Cold War, more to Hungary's than to Poland's, in the sense that considerations removed from immediate security worries would be driving whatever impetus existed to join.

Conclusion

No one should be under any illusion about the "debate" regarding Mexico's possible adhesion to the Atlantic alliance. There has not been any such debate, in Europe or in North America. From the point of view of a public such as Mexico's, which regards the United States and its alliance structure with the same

skepticism, if not abhorrence, as it regards military tools of statecraft in general, the idea of suddenly joining the West's preeminent collective-defense organization would appear to constitute the height of scandal, as well as of absurdity. Similarly, for all the current allies (with the possible exception of Spain, which might be expected to welcome a second Spanish-speaking country joining the alliance), Mexico entering their midst would convey few apparent benefits, and if it did not also carry with it any major threat, it would still appear to be an unusual proposal.

Whatever might be said against the idea, Mexico as a NATO ally would have significance for the future of North America, if that region is indeed to have any future as a "community" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005), and it would do so primarily for two reasons. First, by holding out the prospect of membership conditional upon improvements in Mexico's security sector, NATO as a vehicle for SSR could be expected to assist in "helping" Mexico look more like the "we" of the developed industrialized world and less like the "they" of the developing world. Second, and flowing directly from the first point, Mexico would appear to its crucial North American North American Free Trade Agreement partners as a better bet for a continuation of regionalization and possibly even for the forging of a regional identity. This would mean that, for the first time, NATO would become less an organization marked by a division of labor in which North Americans were regarded as producers of security while Europeans were consumers. With Mexico as a member, NATO would resemble what it so often is regarded as being but has never really been: a more genuine "transatlantic bargain" from which both sides could derive more proportional gain.

It is sometimes asserted, usually with respect to China, which is held widely

Notes

[1] *e s* *m s* *c*. “Thinking the Impossible.”

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