

# Ships, SLOCs

## and Security at Sea

James Boutillier

We are in the midst of what is, arguably, the most dynamic maritime era in living memory. By virtually any metric – shipbuilding tempos, energy flows, megaport development, container traffic, trans-oceanic commerce, the growth of navies, the creation of coast guards, and the likelihood of piracy or maritime terrorism – this is a period without parallel. At its simplest, these phenomena are a product of and contribute to rapid globalisation and, more narrowly, the rise of China and India. They, in turn, are illustrative of the relentless industrialisation of East Asia; the rise of oil-fired economies that are hugely consumptive of energy and whose export-driven economies have placed a new premium on the safe, timely, and untrammelled passage of goods along the so-called Sea Lanes of Communication or SLOCs.

### Contraction of US naval power

While China lies at the heart of these developments, we need to turn our attention to the United States first. The United States is the world's greatest exponent of power projection by sea, a naval power with an unparalleled global presence. However, like the Royal Navy (RN), the United States Navy (USN) is a navy in a state of profound numerical decline.

There were 6700 ships in the USN at the end of World War II. That number fell to approximately 575 by the mid-1980s and currently stands at about 273. While one can argue that individual warships are far more sophisticated and lethal today than they were twenty or sixty years ago, the fact of the matter remains that the USN's decline is not only relative, but absolute as well. Like the RN in the decade before World War I, the USN is faced with growing competition. It would be an exaggeration, *par excellence*, to suggest that the Chinese and Indian navies are any match for the USN, but the correlation of forces, as the Soviets used to say, is moving in ways that are not favourable to American seapower in the long term.

Faced with this reality, the USN has sought to adjust its doctrine and dispositions. Since the end of the Cold War, the USN has shifted its forces from deep ocean operations to littoral operations principally in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; that is to say it foresees American warships operating close to Asian shores. Technology, of course, has enabled naval vessels to project power ashore, in many cases far

ashore. It was one thing for the World War II-era battleship, *USS Missouri*, to bombard the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon from a range of sixteen miles in the 1980s. It was quite another thing for US warships to launch cruise missiles against Khost in the heart of Afghanistan in 1998 in the hope of killing Osama bin Laden. But operating close to an enemy shore is not without its risks because missiles, like Iranian C-802s, are quite capable of reaching well out to sea.

There is another deeply disturbing constraint on US and other naval forces operating in the littoral, namely the threat from the burgeoning array of submarines – some 140 by current estimates – operating in the Indo-Pacific region. In general terms, Asian navies are also going up-market, which is to say that not only are they modernising, but they are also expanding and adding bigger and bigger combatants. Thus, the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN), for example, has moved from corvettes to frigates, while the Royal Bruneian Navy has sought to move from offshore patrol boats to corvettes. A subset of these processes is the appearance of more and more submarines in regional navies. The Chinese are now building submarines at three times the rate of the Americans. Many of the regional boats are quiet, conventional craft, manoeuvrable and difficult to detect. There is, indeed, an irony in all this in the sense that in the 1990s, the USN, relieved of the burden of hunting Soviet boomers and hunter-killer submarines in the deep ocean, articulated doctrines calling for a shift in focus towards enemy coasts. In so doing, the Americans committed their naval assets to operating in submarine-rich environments that are extremely challenging from an anti-submarine warfare (ASW) perspective – all that at a time when they had begun to lose sight of the stern imperatives of ASW.

At the same time, in recognition of the fact that the world centre of political, military, and economic gravity has shifted into the Indo-Pacific region, the Americans have decided that they must redistribute their naval assets. Following the publication of the Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) in March 2006, the USN moved six of its eleven aircraft carriers into the Pacific and stationed 60 per cent of its submarines in the same ocean. Naval operations in World War II had an indelible impact on the USN's psyche. They drove home the tyranny of distance in the Pacific and the need to be close up to Asia if one wishes to continue exercising command of the

sea. This is particularly the case by virtue of Washington's ambiguous security relationship with Taipei and American security alliances with Japan and South Korea.

Thus, what we see is the most powerful navy on earth cut in two, numerically, in the space of two decades; a navy that has fundamentally reordered its doctrine; and a navy that has embarked on a historic redistribution of its assets to reflect contemporary geo-strategic realities. The USN has been, and will continue to be, the principal agent for maintaining peace and good order at sea in the new Asia of the twenty-first century. That said, the USN finds itself faced with those contradictory forces that have afflicted a variety of armed forces in the post-Cold War period, namely strained finances (and a shipbuilding industry beset with difficulties) and rising global commitments.

## 1000-ship navy

The answer to these challenges has been the 1000-ship navy concept. This concept recognises two vital realities: the gulf between naval ends and means and the need for the international maritime community to co-operate in defence of the last great global frontier – the largely unregulated 'ocean commons' of the high seas. Clearly, the 1000-ship moniker is a rhetorical flourish, or at least it is for the moment. However, it is not inconceivable that, downstream, the navies of the world could find themselves functioning as a global maritime force for good order at sea. Certainly, a planet where 90 per cent of all commerce moves by sea argues powerfully in favour of such a visionary collaborative effort. Furthermore, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, that were secondary or tertiary concerns for the USN, have achieved a new prominence in US naval doctrine. While there are those who express anxieties about the potential for a new Cold War at sea between the United States and China, there seems little likelihood that there will be any further Jutlands or Midways. Instead, the grim lessons of the Aceh tsunami of December 2004, coupled with sobering predictions about more devastating tropical storms as a result of global warming, have highlighted the importance of utilising naval assets at the other end of the spectrum – away from war fighting towards constabulary endeavours.

## Rising Chinese naval power

Traditionally, the Chinese paid relatively little attention to the sea. Their priorities related to the maintenance of domestic stability and the defence of the nation from threats emanating out of the heartland of Asia. However, they have reoriented their axis of national interest dramatically in the past quarter century. The locus of economic development has been the coast (and more specifically, the Yangtze and Pearl River deltas). Stellar economic growth has meant that the Chinese have no alternative but to focus mightily on their SLOCs.

SLOC dependency has been further reinforced by China's insatiable appetite for energy, most of which comes in by sea. In fact, China has undergone what can only be described as a maritime revolution; a revolution that has transformed

Beijing's vision of naval power and has fuelled powerful maritime ambitions relative to port development and shipbuilding capacity. In short, the Chinese have embraced Mahan. At its simplest, the Chinese have succumbed to the dictum that great nations have great navies and great navies are the hallmark of great nations. But Mahan's vision was not confined to grey hulls alone. Instead, a nation needs a sense of the importance of the sea, a sense that reflects and reinforces the critical importance of merchant shipping and related maritime infrastructure.

In the past few years, writers and commentators have reflected on the monumental achievements of the great eunuch admiral of early fifteenth century China, Zheng Ho. But Ho's accomplishments were ephemeral and out of keeping with the Middle Kingdom's territorial roots. After the Chinese Communist victory in 1949, Beijing began to contemplate a national navy, but Mao's vision of seapower was extraordinarily limited. Disciples of Soviet naval doctrine, the Chinese used their naval assets for coastal and riverine patrols in support of land operations. Thus, the People's Liberation Army, Navy (PLAN) was not a navy in the true sense of the word. It was a maritime flanking force consisting of increasingly elderly and obsolete patrol craft.

The change began to occur in the 1980s when Admiral Liu Huaqing started to emulate the great Russian admiral, Gorshkov, to the extent that the full, autonomous potential of the PLAN came to be recognised. However, for many years the navy remained a relatively low priority, nationally. What mattered was fostering the economy, but as the economy grew it fed back in a closed loop to the navy. Greater prosperity meant bigger defence budgets, and growing exports and imports meant that a more powerful and sophisticated navy was needed to ensure the integrity of China's SLOCs.

If that argument was not sufficiently compelling in and of itself, there was always the question of how to reincorporate that Chinese *terra irridenta*, Taiwan. Seapower, in its various forms, was clearly one of the keys to ensuring that the 'lost province' was 'merged' with the mainland. Seapower would permit a cross-straits invasion, would enable China to interdict Taiwanese ocean-going commerce, and would set the stage for holding American naval forces at arms length. Thus, temporary sea denial would rob the Taiwanese of any US naval support.

Accordingly, the Chinese set about to do what they had never done before, build and operate a blue-water navy. They have been resolute in their endeavours, capitalising on an indigenous shipbuilding industry and exploiting Russian technical support and arms sales, particularly in the realm of submarines and supersonic ship-killing missiles; the latter intended to be powerful deterrents to US carriers operating in the approaches to Taiwan and off the Chinese coast. As suggested above, the Chinese still have a considerable way to go, but their continued dedication to the design and construction of fresh generations of frigates and destroyers is uncharacteristic, to say the least.

The ahistoric growth of the PLAN, not to mention a significant number of long-range deployments to such far-flung destinations as St. Petersburg and Peru, have fuelled

speculation about the possibility of a Chinese aircraft carrier or carriers. This speculation has waxed and waned since the early 1990s. Currently, the ex-Soviet carrier *Varyag* lies alongside in the northern Chinese port of Dalian. It is only slightly more than a hulk, but the Chinese have painted her in naval livery and are known to have operated aircraft from land-based, simulated flight decks for quite some time now. One can only imagine that there is a titanic debate unfolding within the Chinese naval community about the wisdom of going down the carrier road.

On the one hand, the Chinese are nothing if not pragmatic and it is impossible for them to ignore the fact that the Americans have been involved in high intensity, global carrier operations for more than three-quarters of a century. How can the PLAN ever hope to rival that breathtaking aggregation of experience, let alone cope with the equally breathtaking price tag associated with air wings, carrier logistics, and so forth? However, rising Chinese self-satisfaction at their economic achievements and the siren-like seductions of Mahanianism, argue compellingly in favour of aircraft carriers. After all, the British, the French, the Italians, and, more tellingly, the Indians, have carriers; why not China?

The Chinese, not surprisingly, seem genuinely torn over this issue. For the moment they appear committed to building up those surface elements that would support full-blown carrier operations in the future. Bereft of organic airpower, the PLAN will content itself at present with reliance on submarine and surface-launched anti-ship missiles, but there

seems every likelihood that they will make a historic leap of faith in the realm of carrier operations in the next half-decade. They will no doubt be encouraged to do so, despite their justifiable anxieties, by the declaration by Admiral Mansorin, the Russian chief of navy, to the effect that Russia hopes to have at least half a dozen carriers at sea in the next twenty-five years.

## East-Asian maritime trade

Chinese naval ambitions must be seen and understood within the context of explosive maritime changes ashore. The top six ports in the world (in terms of the throughput of TEUs, or standard twenty-foot containers) are located in East Asia. They are Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Busan and Kaohsiung. In 2005, Singapore handled 23,192,000 TEUs. By way of contrast, the port of Vancouver (which, in its defence, is also a bulk port) handled 1.7 million containers. Five million containers behind Singapore was the port of Shanghai. A year later, in 2006, Shanghai handled just under 22 million TEUs and seems destined, very shortly, to become the world's largest port in terms of container traffic. It is telling to note that Shenzhen handles more TEUs every year than all of the ports in the United States combined.

What we see, therefore, is the world's greatest aggregation of ports in the 1200-mile arc from Hong Kong to Busan. This is 'ground zero' in the world of global commerce. If we look at this phenomenon in a slightly different way, we see

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that Shanghai has been growing, year on year, by roughly 28 per cent, a staggering achievement. This growth reflects the fact that trans-Pacific trade is 3.5 times as great as trans-Atlantic trade, and intra-Asian trade is growing even faster. Accordingly, even if a self-confident and nationalistic China felt that it could forego having a navy, the imperatives of commerce protection would make arguments in favour of a navy irresistible.

An absolutely critical dimension of China's seagoing commerce is its enormous reliance on imported energy. In the past decade, Beijing has embarked on a concerted campaign to diversify its energy sources. The result is oil and gas flowing from such places as Venezuela, Western Canada, the Sudan, the Middle East, and Indonesia. These energy SLOCs lead outwards from the Chinese coast across the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In the case of the latter, tankers bound for China pass close by India and through the narrow confines of the Strait of Malacca. Recently, Chinese leaders have expressed anxiety about the possibility that the Strait of Malacca might be closed by accident or design, thereby interrupting crucial energy imports. Consequently, Beijing has embarked on a complementary strategy, one that sees China also importing energy overland from Russia and the Central Asian republics.

China's appetite for energy is huge. Asia's consumption is growing much faster than the world's and China's consumption is growing much faster than Asia's. China consumes more energy than Africa and the Middle East combined. China produces eight million barrels per day but consumes 24 million barrels per day and the levels of dependency are rising steadily, particularly as China introduces more and more vehicles on the nation's roads. The sales of heavy-duty trucks – now standing at ten million – have risen six-fold since 2000, while car sales have risen eight-fold.

To cope with this mounting demand, China has begun to expand its shipbuilding capacity dramatically. China has been the world's third-largest shipbuilder for some years and in the period from 2000 to 2005 it accounted for 29 per cent of global production; all this at a time when 90 per cent of the world's merchant ships are built in Asia. China's expected output will be 40 million dead weight tons in 2010 and Beijing anticipates that China will be the world's largest shipbuilder by 2015, overtaking South Korea and Japan in all but the most sophisticated construction realms.

## Japanese reactions

The Japanese have grown increasingly concerned about the relentless rise of Chinese naval power. This is ironic in the sense that Beijing railed for many years about Japanese remilitarisation and it is now China that has racked up almost two decades of double-digit growth in military budgets.

Concerns about China's military might have contributed to a profound reassessment of Japan's place within the northeast Asian security environment. The trigger, if one can identify a single cause, was North Korea's decision to launch a three-stage Taepodong missile over Japan and into the North Pacific in late August 1998. This event was Japan's

9/11. It brought home to Tokyo – a capital otherwise captured by the problem of Japanese anaemic economy – the nation's parlous security condition.

The Japanese, after all, live in a tough neighbourhood. They have fought the Russians repeatedly (and, indeed, are still technically at war with them since the Russo-Japanese conflict in World War II has never been concluded with a peace treaty), occupied the Korean peninsula for over a third of a century, and fought the Chinese in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What the Japanese see now is a Russia re-emerging from the turmoil of the 1990s, a nuclear-armed North Korea, a South Korea challenging Japanese territorial claims at sea, and a China emerging as the military and economic great power of East Asia.

If the North Korean missile launch was a wake-up call for the Japanese, 9/11 was the galvanising moment in terms of national priorities. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the Japanese Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, promised assistance to the United States despite the fact that there was no enabling legislation on the books empowering him to do so. The Diet addressed this deficit with remarkable speed and by the late autumn of 2001, Tokyo began dispatching Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) vessels to the Indian Ocean in support of Coalition Task Force 150, the allied naval formation that was operating in the North Arabian Sea over and against al-Qa'eda. This was history in the making. What had been completely unthinkable suddenly became thinkable, and the Japanese started deploying warships to the Indian Ocean for the first time since 1945.

These historic deployments (terminated briefly in late 2007 as a result of political manoeuvring within the Diet) were part of a much larger reassessment of Japan's security needs. That reassessment resulted, over the years, in the defence agency being elevated to ministerial status and serious, though attenuated, attention being paid to the possibility of deleting or revising Article 9, the so-called 'no war' clause in the Japanese constitution. Those changes occurred over and against an increasingly brittle security environment, particularly at sea.

## Contentions

Unlike the Atlantic, which is largely free of contentious jurisdictional disputes, the Pacific is plagued by jurisdictional problems. Any visitor to the office of the South Korean Chief of Naval Operations will be struck by the fact that, sitting on the coffee table in his office, is a large plaster model of Dokdo Islet, a rocky outcrop that stands roughly halfway between South Korea and Japan and is disputed by both powers.

Similarly, far to the south, in the approaches to the northern coast of Taiwan, is the Chunxiao oil and gas field. Beijing and Tokyo have come head-to-head over where the maritime boundary lies between the two nations and whether the Chinese are trying to tap into the field by drilling diagonally from just inside their territory in order to gain access to the reserves. Beijing is employing a continental shelf interpretation derived from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, while Tokyo is employing a median

line argument (an argument that Beijing has employed with respect to disputed claims elsewhere in the region!).

Whatever the case, this is only one of an array of maritime irritations or provocations involving the Chinese and Japanese. These have led to Tokyo lodging a series of formal complaints about the unauthorised penetration of Japanese water space by Chinese surface vessels and submarines. The Chinese, for their part, are almost certainly engaged in detailed hydrographic work in an effort to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the oceanic domain off China's coasts; the arena in which they see the possibility of hostile naval activity involving the USN and, potentially, the JMSDF.

In keeping with this familiarisation strategy, the PLAN has been deploying more and more of its submarines into the waters of the Western Pacific and beyond in order to test American awareness of their activities. The high profile surfacing of a Chinese *Song*-class submarine within five miles of a US carrier battle group (seemingly undetected by the Americans) in 2006 is an illustration of this phenomenon. One can only presume that the USN is equally active, but these Cold War-style deployments by both sides raise the stakes in the Western Pacific demonstrably.

The Americans have sought to address the relative decline of their global naval presence by forging new maritime ties in the region. The most obvious of these relates to the Washington-New Delhi axis. While both capitals would be quick to dismiss arguments that Indo-American naval collaboration is aimed at containing China, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that that is exactly what it is intended to do. Indeed, if you look at the world through Chinese eyes, you see American forces in South Korea, Japan, Okinawa, Guam, the Philippines, Australia, Singapore, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Mongolia. In a number of cases, the American presence is minimal – contingents dedicated to communications, intelligence, or Special Forces operations. But the perception of 'containment' is inescapable.

Nonetheless, the Chinese are not above implementing their own containment strategies. The Chinese are almost the only friends that the beleaguered and thuggish junta in Burma have. In fact, Beijing is particularly interested in the geo-strategic potential of Burma. The Chinese have established listening stations on the Burmese coast, a metaphoric stone's throw from Port Blair in the Andaman Islands, the home of India's East Fleet headquarters. Those same stations are able to monitor missile telemetry from India's east coast launch site. Burma is also a convenient source of energy, timber, and minerals destined for China, and, *in extremis*, the Chinese could bring Middle Eastern oil across Burma to Yunnan in the event of some disruption of tanker traffic through the Strait of Malacca.

## Indian Ocean rivalries

The Chinese also have a military presence in an area of the Himalayas contested by Beijing and New Delhi and have sought to reinforce their long-standing relationship with Pakistan by investing \$US400 million in the development

of the new Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Baluchi coast west of Karachi and close up to the Strait of Hormuz. There has been a good deal of speculation among analysts as to whether the Chinese will utilise Gwadar in the future as a port from which PLAN vessels can sortie.

Certainly, Chinese interests in Indian Ocean maritime commerce have continued to grow steadily as a consequence of Beijing's greater and greater dependence on Iranian and Middle Eastern energy, as well as China's contemporary diplomatic offensive into Africa strategically in search of oil, gas, and critical raw materials.

These developments are occurring at a time when India has become increasingly unambiguous about its naval primacy in the Indian Ocean. Not only are the Indians concerned about China's growing maritime and naval interest in what New Delhi considers to be its ocean, they are also concerned about the evolution and security of their own SLOCs. India is highly dependent on imported energy and bland reassurances, notwithstanding, New Delhi sees China as the enemy of the future.

This is yet another example of the hedging strategies that have become a hallmark of the region. Put simply, what you see – or hear – is not necessarily what you get. While there is a good deal of anti-Americanism in the region (based, in part, on justifiable critiques of the shortcomings in American foreign policy), no one wants the Americans to absent themselves from the region.

The overarching regional concern is what China's endgame is. Despite rhetoric from Beijing about the 'peaceful rise' of China and despite the more polished and nuanced performances of Chinese spokespeople abroad, there are



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deep reservations across the region as to what the world will look like when Chinese hegemony (a term that horrifies the Chinese who have always wanted to reserve that word as a code for thinly veiled criticisms of the United States) becomes more evident.

Thus, what we find are overt and covert security arrangements being put in place side-by-side with burgeoning, 'business as usual' commerce with China. India is a part of this phenomenon. Trade between Indian and China continues to grow at an impressive pace, but New Delhi remains clearly undecided about just how benign the world will be when China's military and political power becomes more profound.

The Indian and Pacific Oceans are the quintessential maritime arenas and it is perhaps no surprise that New Delhi has sought to exploit the inherent flexibility, mobility, and versatility of seapower in order to develop one of the premier elements of India's hedging strategy. More specifically, this has taken the form of a dramatic expansion of naval ties between the Indian Navy (IN) and the USN.

It is important to note, however, that New Delhi has not confined itself to the American axis alone. Instead, the IN has begun to engage in an active outreach programme to other navies in the region, like the Indonesian Navy and the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN). This multinational strategy was illustrated graphically in September 2007, when the IN played host to the USN, the RSN, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), and, tellingly, the JMSDF, in the big Malabar 02-07 exercise in the Bay of Bengal. Japanese participation was particularly noteworthy because the Japanese have long invoked the alleged prohibition of 'collective security' to justify confining their naval exercises to the USN alone. Are we witnessing the waning of this long held, but dubious, construct? Is Japanese involvement a measure of Japan's desire to be recognised as a full participant in and contributor to global security?

## Nascent interactions

Whatever the case, naval diplomacy has become a critical element in the language of regional security. This fact was highlighted by the visit of the PLAN's destroyer *Shenzhen* to Tokyo and the corresponding refusal by the Chinese authorities to allow the American carrier *USS Kitty Hawk* to enter Hong Kong. Similarly, the USN's utilisation of naval vessels to provide relief to storm-ravaged Bangladesh builds on a global trend (sparked in large part by naval support for tsunami victims in Aceh in 2004-05) toward the inclusion of humanitarian relief (HR) and disaster assistance (DA) as a frontline naval responsibility. This trend has been reinforced by increasingly cogent arguments that global warming will contribute to greater and greater levels of storm damage in an area of the world already prone to flooding, landslides, and earthquakes.

The focus on the HR and DA, as they have come to be called, is a promising sign. There are probably more flashpoints at sea in the Indian and Pacific Oceans than anywhere else in the world. Concerns over fisheries, illegal fishing, piracy, contested maritime boundaries, the movement

of illegals by sea, terrorism, the ownership of islets, and the unauthorised penetration of water space have contributed to levels of tension across the Indo-Pacific region.

At the same time, however, there is mounting evidence of a willingness on the part of navies and nations to cooperate at sea. One of the foremost examples related to the security mechanism, formalised in September 2007, among the Indonesian, Singaporean, and Malaysian governments, whereby they agreed to maintain trilateral naval patrols (commenced in July 2005) for the purpose of preventing piratical attacks in the Strait of Malacca.

These countries are also members of the region-wide Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) which brings together all of the regional heads of navies to discuss common concerns and foster cooperation. We have also witnessed the willingness of a number of navies – the USN, IN, RSN, and RAN – to work together to provide relief for tsunami victims in Indonesia and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, and the commitment of two Chinese vessels from Qingdao to assist South Korean authorities in their efforts to cope with a major oil spill on beaches southwest of Seoul.

We are currently in the midst of what is, arguably, the most dynamic maritime era in living memory. By virtually any metric – shipbuilding tempo, energy flows, megaport development, container traffic, trans-oceanic commerce, the growth of navies, the creation of coast guards and the likelihood of piracy or terrorism – this is a period without parallel in the Asia-Pacific region.

Both India and China, reliant on export-driven economies, have reoriented their national axes toward the sea. Both nations are building up their naval power and the USN, concerned about the dramatic growth of the Chinese navy, has repositioned the bulk of its carrier and submarine assets into the Pacific. The USN has sought to enlist the support of like-minded navies in keeping with the 1000-ship navy concept – and to build a navy-to-navy relationship with the Indian Navy; a move buttressed by closer relations between the latter and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force.

These are tectonic shifts in naval power. The problem of reconciling national foreign policy objectives with operational priorities constitute a series of significant challenges for the countries and navies operating in the Pacific. ♦

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