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Russian Hard Power in the South Caucasus

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The three countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia constitute the region known as the South Caucasus, which is geographically and politically situated at the convergence of Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Historically, it has served as a corridor for traders, travelers and conquerors alike. Although none of the three countries alone plays a central role on the world state, the region as a whole serves as an arena for the ambitions of several nearby powers: Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the Western players of the European Union (EU) and the NATO alliance.

By far the country with the most palpable presence in the region is Russia. Although a quarter century has passed since the fall of the Soviet Union and the establishment of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as independent states, Russia continues to play a significant role in the region's political, cultural, economic and military affairs.

In recent years, much of the analysis of the region has turned to the influence of "soft power" – the non-coercive, more subtle means of influencing political processes by "getting others to want what you want."[1] Yet much of the power exerted in the South Caucasus comes down to the application of the more traditional "hard power," which is exercised through arms deals, troops and tanks.

Despite hopes for a new paradigm based on authority derived from admiration and consent, military threats remain the main driver of decisions in the Caucasus corridor.

An evaluation of Russia's use of this type of power reveals a preoccupation with wider regional trends: the threat of Western encroachment, the importance of energy politics, the rise of Turkey and Iran as regional powers, and anxiety regarding Islamic extremism. While Russian activity in the region is undeniably connected to the Soviet legacy, the decision to maintain a strong military presence in the South Caucasus reflects modern security interests beyond any Soviet nostalgia.

Armenia: The Russian Outpost

In Armenia, the Russian military presence is demonstrated in a number of areas. The largest of these is the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri. The base was established in 1994 and garnered an extended 25-year contract in 1995. And in 2010, the governments of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia agreed to deepen relations further, extending the tenure of the base until 2044 and expanding Russia's commitment to Armenia's military security.[2] The Russian base in Armenia acts both as "cover for Russia's southern flank" and as protection for Armenia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).[3]

[1] Nye, Joseph, *The Paradox of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 9. Cited in Rostoks, Toms and Spruds, Andris (Eds.), *The different faces of "soft power": the Baltic States and Eastern Neighborhood between Russia and the EU* (Riga: The Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2015), p. 14.

[2] Araratyan, Aram, "The Russian Base in Gyumri: Facts and Figures." *Horizon* Weekly, 4 February 2015. www.horizonweekly.ca/news/details/60972

[3] German, Tracey, "Securing the South Caucasus: Military Aspects of Russian Policy towards the Region

According to the most recent information, provided by military reports in 2013, the base is staffed with around 5,000 soldiers, as well as the following military equipment: 74 tanks, 17 infantry fighting vehicles (IFV), and 148 armoured personnel carriers (APC). Gyumri is also equipped with Russian artillery systems (84), as well as the S-300 and S-200 surface-to-air missile systems. Russian forces are also responsible for securing Armenia's Western border with Turkey, as well as oversight of the Armenian-Iranian border. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, 18 Russian MiG-29 fighter jets, are also stationed at the base and at the Erebuni military airport in Yerevan.[4]

Armenia's acquiescence to the Russian military presence is based on significant degrees of dependence and isolation due to the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan and the resulting closed borders with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. However, the Russian military presence in Armenia is not met with sweeping national approval. The murder of an Armenian family by a Russian soldier in Gyumri, which sparked violent protests, was the fourth incident of soldier-local hostility to occur in the last sixteen years.[5] However, the Armenian government continues to support the Russian military presence in the country.[6]

Azerbaijan: The Aloof Energy Magnate

The Russian military presence in Azerbaijan is the most minimal. In the 1990's and into the early 2000s, Russia maintained a radar early-warning station in Gabala, which provided air-defense monitoring and early missile-attack warnings.[7] In 2012, however, Russia withdrew its personnel after prolonged and difficult negotiations over extending the lease agreement with the host nation. Although there have been rumors of a possible future Russian military presence in Azerbaijan,[8] currently there are no Russian bases or troops in the country.

Azerbaijan's relationship with Russia has been described as "neither/nor" – neither explicitly close to Russia, nor seeking to deepen ties with the West.[9] This stance is based on a continual reliance on Russian support coupled with a desire to escape the trappings of the post-Soviet patron/client state relationship and achieve genuine sovereign control over internal and foreign policy decisions.

On one hand, Azerbaijan's outward aloofness is underlay with significant military dependence on Russia. According to American private analysis firm *Stratfor*, as much as 85 percent of Azerbaijan's military supplies still come from Russia.[10]

Yet this relationship is far from straightforward. As discussed above, Russia has a very strong military presence in Armenia, and is a guarantor of Armenian security through the CSTO. By providing arms and equipment to both, Russia's position as one of the main mediators of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is necessarily problematic,[11] as the country's two-sided support has not gone unnoticed.[12]

since 2008," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 64 (9), October 2012.

[4] "The Russian Base in Gyumri. Facts and Figures," *Horizon Weekly*, 4 February 2015. www.horizonweekly.ca/news/details/60972

[5] Ibid

[6] Kucera, Joshua, "As Protests Continue In Yerevan, Russia Concedes To Armenia On Soldier Murder Case," *EurasiaNet*, 27 June 2015. www.eurasianet.org/node/74051

[7] German, 2012.

[8] "Azerbaijani residents against Russian military base in their country," News.am, 29 August 2015. http://news.am/eng/news/283528.html

[9] Geybullayeva, Arzu, "Azerbaijan: Striking a Balance between Russia and the West," in Shirinyan, Anahit and Slavkova, Louisa (Eds.), *Unrewarding Crossroads? The Black Sea Region amidst the European Union and Russia* (Sofia: Foundation Sofia Platform, June 2015), p. 29-40.

[10] "Turkish Military Cooperation Prompts Russian Military Moves in the Caucasus," *Stratfor*, 11 July 2015. www.stratfor.com/analysis/turkish-military-cooperation-prompts-russian-military-moves-caucasus

[11] Giragosian, Richard. "Armenia's Imperative: Regaining Strategic Balance," in Shirinyan, Anahit and Slavkova, Louisa (Eds.), *Unrewarding Crossroads? The Black Sea Region amidst the European Union and Russia* (Sofia: Foundation Sofia Platform, June 2015), p. 13-28.

[12] In June 2014, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan spoke out for the first time against Russia's military cooperation with Baku. See Harutyunyan, Sargis. "Russian-Azeri Arms Deals 'Discussed By Putin, Sarkisian," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Armenian Service, 20 March 2015. www.azatutyun.am/content/article/26911953.html; Azerbaijan's leadership is similarly wary of Russia when it comes to support regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Although no explicit statements have been made regarding the stance that Moscow would take if war were to break out, Azerbaijan cannot discount this possibility. See Geybullayeva, Arzu, "Azerbaijan: Striking a Balance between Russia and the West," in Shirinyan, Anahit and Slavkova, Louisa (Eds.), *Unrewarding Crossroads? The Black Sea Region amidst the European Union and Russia*, (Sofia: Foundation Sofia Platform, June 2015), p. 29-40.

Due to Russia's support of Armenia, Azerbaijan has attempted to build a number of key military relationships with international partners based on political interests, geographic significance and energy importance. In 2014, Azerbaijan agreed to participate in trilateral military exercises with neighbors Turkey and Georgia. This agreement builds on earlier cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan, which dates back to the early 1990's, but that has significantly declined in recent years.[13]

Azerbaijan also receives support from non-regional sources. In 2012, Israel and Azerbaijan signed a $1.6 billion dollar arms deal, for example, for the purchase of advanced drones, anti-aircraft and missile defense systems from Israel.[14] The US is also a potential partner. With the launch of the US-led "war on terror" and the perceived threat of Iran, the United States began in 2002 to provide aid to Azerbaijan for the purpose of supporting counter-terrorism efforts, despite the ban on such aid that was legally established in Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act.[15]

Yet despite Azerbaijan's worries about Russia's loyalty and resulting desire for diversification of support, no other country comes close to matching Russia's contribution to the Azerbaijani military.

Georgia: The Unwilling Partner

Georgia presents the most contentious example of military relations between a South Caucasus country and Russia. While the two countries initially worked together closely following the collapse of the Soviet Union, rising tensions in late 2007 and the eventual Russian-Georgian war of 2008 ended this cooperation. Since then, the only Russian troops remaining within Georgia's territory have been in the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Russia recognizes as independent state entities.

The Russian presence in Abkhazia was established in 1994 with the signing of a ceasefire agreement, which gave a mandate for a CIS peacekeeping force. In practice, the forces stationed in Abkhazia were Russian. In 2008, Russia signed a separate agreement with Abkhazia, according to which Russia is granted the right to maintain troop presence, as well as "military infrastructure."[16] At Russia's 7th military base in Guduata, which is allowed to remain in operation until 2060, Abkhazia hosts 3,500 Russian soldiers.[17] Russia also has a significant military presence along Abkhazia's (and therefore Georgia's) Black Sea coast due to Russian control of the Ochamchire port and a large number of Russian-controlled radar stations.[18]

Russia's base in South Ossetia, the 4th military base, is located in the districts of Tskhinvali and Java; additional military equipment and personnel are also stationed in the Kanchavet and Akhalgori districts. In total, some 3,800 Russian soldiers are stationed in South Ossetia.[19] This base is equipped with both short-range "Tochka" missile systems and heavy "Smerch" multiple rocket launchers.[20]

Given the poor state of Georgia-Russia relations, it is not surprising that Georgia does not welcome Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition to the fact that the presence of troops legitimizes the occupation, further objections stem from the ease with which Russian troops and missiles would be able to reach Tbilisi. Moreover, recent reports suggest that Russian troops have been expanding the former de-facto borders to include more and more of Georgia's territory.[21]

However, it is unlikely that the Georgian government will have the political will or power to force the removal of the Russian military presence from Georgia anytime soon.

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[13] "Turkish Military Cooperation Prompts Russian Military Moves in the Caucasus," *Stratfor*, 2015.

[14] "Israel signs $1.6 billion arms deal with Azerbaijan," *Haaretz*, 26 February 2012. www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/israel-signs-1-6- billion-arms-deal-with-azerbaijan-1.414916

[15] Danielyan, Emil, "U.S. Scraps Arms Sales Ban On Armenia, Azerbaijan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Armenian Service, 29 March 2009. www.azatutyun.mobi/a/1567641.html

[16] Frear, Thomas, "The foreign policy options of a small, unrecognized state: the case of Abkhazia," *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 1 (2), April 2014.

[17] Kucera, Joshua, "At Press Conference, Putin Forgets About Military Bases in Armenia, Moldova, Abkhazia...," *EurasiaNet*, 18 December 2014. www.eurasianet.org/node/71416

[18] Rukhadze, Vasili, "Russia Underscores its Military Presence in Georgia's Breakaway Regions," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10 (101), 29 May 2013. www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40952&no_cache=1#.Vfa6dhGqqko

[19] Kucera, 2014.

[20] Rukhadze, 2013.

[21] Coffey, Luke. "The creeping Russian border in Georgia," *Al-Jazeera*, 27 July 2015. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/07/creeping-russian-border-georgia-south-ossetia-abkhazia-150722111452829.html

Russian Hard-Power Interests in the Caucasus

Russia's interests in the region are based on three key core concerns: limiting Western influence as part of the larger goal of protecting and projecting Russian power and influence, ensuring control over energy export routes and alliances in the region, and working to combat Islamic Extremism.

Relations with the West: Power Projection

The first reason for the continued Russian military presence in the South Caucasus is to clearly mark this territory as Russian — rather than Western — domain. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has considered countries in the former Soviet Union to be within its zone of influence or "near abroad." Pursuing a modern day, eastern style of the Monroe Doctrine, Russia's near abroad policy stems from the view that the political and military[22] decisions of FSU countries should ultimately be in the hands of Moscow.

Yet Russia's near abroad policy and corresponding military presence in the South Caucasus is not confined in ambition to influencing the affairs of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The collapse of the USSR heralded that expansion of the EU and NATO, while Russia was relegated to the status of a fading power. If this paradigm were fully realized, there would be nothing stopping the countries of the South Caucasus from seeking close integration with Western economic and security entities.

Moreover, Russian military dominance in the South Caucasus, therefore, is part of the larger project of reasserting Russian power in a post-Soviet world, as the simple act of marking and defending the "near abroad" claim in the face of potential global competitors works to illustrate Russia's enduring role as a formidable power on the international stage.

The Russian-Georgian War of 2008 was the clearest example of this policy and its ability to define power relations. While the outcome of military engagements in Georgia is not directly related to the national interests of most countries, the uninterrupted and total military dominance of Georgia allowed Russia to rise in terms of political-military importance and reminded Western powers that, regardless of any professed values of global solidarity and protective interventionism, there are simply some issues on which the EU and NATO are not willing to challenge Russia. By reminding the West of its place and bolstering Russian confidence, the initial victory in Georgia set the stage for Russia's current military stance, including the annexation of Crimea and antagonistic engagement with Ukraine.[23]

The policy of maintaining the dominant presence in the South Caucasus also serves the goal of limiting the ideological reach of the EU. Russia's worldview is grounded in a high value for security and the perception of interstate relations as necessarily competitive; the existence of the EU's alternative model, which promises prosperity through amicable cooperation, is a threat to Russia's paradigm of regional and domestic governance. By using "hard power" tactics, Russia shatters the illusion of a purely "soft power" world in which national decisions can be made according to desires, rather than imperatives.

For example, in 2010, Armenia opened negotiations with the EU regarding the possibility of deepening relations through an EU Association Agreement. In response, Russia later hinted at the removal of its troops — and therefore security guarantees — if Armenia chose this option over the Russia-lead Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).[24] Yerevan's decision to turn away from its European ambitions stood as a reminder that, while the ideals of free trade and movement that the EU embodies are attractive, the dominant interest of a state will always be its security.

Control over the East-West Corridor: The South Caucasus as a 'System of Systems'

Ambassador David J. Smith, a Senior Fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), describes the South Caucasus as a "system of systems" that connects Europe to the Eurasian Heartland, an area of high strategic

[22] Alison, Roy, "Military Factors in Foreign Policy," in Neil Malcolm, Alex Pravda, Roy Alison and Margot Light (eds.), *Internal Factors in Russian Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 230-285.

[23] One of NATO's responses to the annexation of Crimea also targeted the South Caucasus. In 2014, it was announced that NATO would seek to increase military ties with Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as Moldova. It is important to note that Georgia was not included in the list of countries. See: "Nato plans stronger military ties to ex-Soviet states south of Russia," *The Guardian*, 1 April 2014. www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/01/nato-plans-stronger-military-ties-armenia-azerbaijan-moldova

[24] Giragosian, 2015.

importance and resource wealth.[25] Specifically, the South Caucasus is a key point of connection for two important sources of power: the transport of energy and the consolidation of regional alliances. Russia military presence acts as an attempt to control these processes and to prevent other neighboring rival powers – specifically Iran and Turkey – from being allowed to expand their influence.

Energy

The South Caucasus is an important hub for the transport of both oil and gas, as well as home to a resource producer: Azerbaijan. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP), and Baku-Supsa pipelines allow Azerbaijan to transport oil and gas – both its own and Central Asian products – to European markets.

Russia is well aware that control over the production and especially transport of energy is one of the main factors determining Moscow's hold over political dealings. In 1998, American journalist Jeffrey Goldberg wrote in the *New York Times* that Vafa Gulizade, Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev's foreign-policy adviser, had said to him:

> *"Oil is our [Azerbaijan's] strategy, it is our defense, and it is our independence."*[26]

Indeed, resource wealth has allowed Azerbaijan to achieve a higher level of autonomy than would have been possible otherwise. Again, the issue comes down to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In 2012, Azerbaijan spent over $3 billion on its military budget; this figure represents 4.6% of GDP, compared to 2.3% in 2001. In comparison, in 2012 Armenia was only able to spend $408 million.[27]

These figures illustrate the transformative power of energy in the former Soviet Union: if the most pressing interest of states in this region is security, then the second most pressing the development of an independent and prosperous economy so as to be able to meet security needs without relying on the patronage of Russia.

As energy wealth for Azerbaijan is the key to achieving both of these goals, it is also a focal point of Russian concern. In order to make the experience of energy-based independence as uncomfortable as possible, Russia has used military power to remind Azerbaijan of its presence, from "gunboat diplomacy" in the resource-rich, highly contested Caspian Sea,[28] to aggressive tactics along the Baku-Supsa pipeline during the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.[29]

Without a doubt, Russia's bargaining power will become stronger in the coming years. The end of Azerbaijan's oil boom, combined with reduced cooperation with the US due to the removal of troops from Afghanistan, means that Azerbaijan will have fewer friends and potentially fewer resources.[30] If the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continues or indeed escalates, cooperation with Russia in exchange for hard power resources will suddenly become a much more attractive option.

Regional Powers and Military Alliances

The second important factor underlying Russia's military presence in the South Caucasus is the struggle to prevent regional alliances from deepening. Historically, this centered on the fear of the pan-Turkic movement: if Turkey were allowed to join its territory with Azerbaijan's, this would enable a single line of connection between Turkic-speaking peoples from the Mediterranean into Central Asia. According to this narrative, Russia's central imperative is the protection of Armenia, as this country stands as the only real obstacle to achieving the pan-Turkic ideal.

Yet the modern reality is based on strategic sensibility, rather than any "Clash of Civilizations"

[25] Specifically, Smith draws on the "Heartland Theory" of English geographer Sir Halford John Mackinder, which posits that maintaining control over the area connecting Europe, Asia and Africa was key to global dominance. See: Smith, David J. "Azerbaijan and Georgia: The Enduring Strategic Importance of the South Caucasus East-West Corridor," *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*: *Expert Opinion*, 19, 2014.

[26] Goldberg, Jeffrey, "Getting Crude in Baku: The Crude Face of Global Capitalism," *The New York Times Magazine*, 4 October 1998. www.nytimes.com/1998/10/04/magazine/the-crude-face-of-global-capitalism.html

[27] SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database

[28] Baev, Pavel K., *Russian Energy Policy and Military Power: Putin's Quest for Greatness* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[29] Smith, 2014.

[30] De Waal, Thomas, "What Lies Ahead for Azerbaijan,?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 October 2013. http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/10/07/what-lies-ahead-for-azerbaijan

logic: Turkish-Armenian relations continue to improve[31] and the newest military ally of Turkey and Azerbaijan is Christian Georgia. As such, while maintaining a strong military presence in Armenia is also in Russia's interest, keeping pressure on Georgia (and therefore its allies) by maintaining bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia sends a clear message that attempting to expand military reach into Russia's backyard is not without risk.

The other potentially expansive power in the region is Iran. As relations between Tehran and the West continue to improve, Armenia has the potential to serve as a "bridge" between Iran and foreign investors – a potential partnership that Russia does not encourage.[32] For example, while the prospect of an Iranian-Armenian railway would open the possibility of increased trade between the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Asia, as well as significantly improve Armenia's economic situation, Moscow is extremely wary of this new project.[33] As of yet, Russia has made no overt moves to force Armenia to terminate the project.

However, due to the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Russia's position as Armenia's security guarantor, Russia holds a powerful trump card – the removal of military support – in the case that Armenia's relations with Iran become too friendly for Russia's comfort.

The Role of Islamic Extremism in Russia's Transcaucasia Military Policy

Ultimately, Russia views the South Caucasus according to the position implied by a second name for the region: Transcaucasia. This name alludes to the fact that it is the region beyond Russia's own territory in the Northern Caucasus mountains, which includes historically Islamist hotspots Chechnya, Daghestan, Ingushetia and KBK (Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay).

These regions experienced significant upheaval in the 1990s following the rise of militant Islamist separatists, including the establishment of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, the First Chechen War 1994-1996, and the declaration of the Islamic Djamaat of Dagestan that lead to the invasion of Dagestan and the Second Chechen War in 1999.

These conflicts were recently revived by the introduction of a new player, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant): on June 23, 2015, following pledges of allegiance by militants in each of the four regions, ISIS declared these regions as a governorate, which they call Wilayat Qawqaz.[34] Meanwhile, the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus, which pledges allegiance to al-Qaida, has operated in Russian territories directly to the North-East, since 2007.

The proximity of powerful Islamic neighbors Iran and Turkey, as well as the return of Islam to the political and public spheres of Azerbaijan presents Russia with strong anxiety concerning the growth of powerful Muslim forces within and surrounding Russia's borders.

The countries of the South Caucasus act as a buffer between these powers and must be controlled to avoid any potential further incursion into Russian territory. As a result, Russia views ensuring security in the Northern Caucasus as dependent on security in Transcaucasia – the South Caucasus – as well.[35]

Conclusion

While often cast as a "Soviet hangover," the Russian military presence in the South Caucasus is based on a current preoccupation with modern security dilemmas.

A number of recent developments will undoubtedly influence the level and nature of Russia's future policy. Firstly, decreasing tensions between the West and Iran will more than likely send the current system of alliances and antagonisms into flux. Secondly, any sort of "unfreezing" of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan,

[31] Hill, Fiona, Kemal Kirişci and Andrew Moffatt, "Armenia and Turkey: From normalization to reconciliation," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 13 (4), Winter 2015. http://turkishpolicy.com/pdf/Armenia-and-Turkey-From-Normalization-to-Reconciliation-Winter-2015_82b3.pdf

[32] Giragosian, Richard, "Armenia as a bridge to Iran? Russia won't like it," *Al-Jazeera*, 30 August 2015. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/08/armenia-bridge-iran-russia-won-150830063735998.html

[33] Abrahamyan, Gayane, "Could Russia Spoil Armenia's Iranian Investment Dreams?" *EurasiaNet*, 17 July 2015. www.eurasianet.org/node/74286

[34] Gambhir, Harleen, "ISIS declares governorate in Russia's North Caucasus Region," *Institute for the Study of War*, 23 June 2015. http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-declares-governorate-russia%E2%80%99s-north-caucasus-region

[35] Yemelianova, Galina, "Islam, nationalism and state in the Muslim Caucasus," *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 1 (2), April 2014.

whether due to a successful peace deal or the outbreak of war, would severely complicate Russia's military engagements in the entire region.

Ultimately, the South Caucasus stands as an area of both historical and modern strategic interest for Russia. It is likely that the Russian military presence here will not dwindle over time, but instead will continue to be used to leverage power within the region, against local competitors, and on the world stage.

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