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Newport, R.I.**

**COIN CAS: SMART LIMITS ON CLOSE AIR SUPPORT IN
COUNTERINSURGENCY**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

U.S. military doctrine for the conduct of a counterinsurgency makes security of the population a priority. Providing security for the population protects them from unnecessary casualties and the destruction of their property. This doctrine is being applied in the on-going North Atlantic Treaty Organization International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan. The former and current International Security Assistance Force Commanders have expended significant time and energy inculcating a culture among coalition troops for protecting the population, and apologizing for occurrences of civilian casualties and collateral damage. Tactical directives issued by the Commanders have provided their intent for the employment of airstrikes, but lack specificity in how forces should accomplish that intent. Joint doctrine establishes three types of close air support with varying requirements for the ground controller to see the target and attacking aircraft. The most restrictive procedures are Type 1 where the ground controller must see both the target and the attacking aircraft. Establishing Type 1 close air support as the standard for the conduct of airstrikes in Afghanistan would add critical specificity to the tactical directives and bolster the counterinsurgency effort. Furthermore, this technique should be added to all existing American military doctrine dealing with counterinsurgency to support the requirement to minimize civilian casualties and collateral damage.

INTRODUCTION

The employment of airstrikes in Afghanistan has always been an intense topic of discussion. This discussion commenced with the introduction of U.S. military forces into the country less than a month after the Al-Qaeda attack of September 11th, 2001 when planners lamented the dearth of suitable targets. The discussion has continued to the present in which an over-reliance on airpower is seen by many as a key factor which is undermining the success of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) campaign in Afghanistan and in counterinsurgency in general.¹

With the struggle in Afghanistan being characterized as a counterinsurgency, the appropriate role and application of airpower continues to be a topic of significant debate. At its heart are the often competing priorities of protecting the population while protecting ourselves and killing the insurgents and terrorists. While the vast majority of airstrikes in Afghanistan since the summer of 2009 adequately balance these competing priorities, the relatively rare cases in which airstrikes have destroyed the property of non-combatants and/or killed civilians have had a disproportionate effect on the overall campaign.²

The two most recent International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) Commanders in Afghanistan have issued much touted guidance to their forces for the employment of airstrikes. This guidance attempts to steer the use of air-to-ground munitions towards only those cases that are consistent with the counterinsurgency tenet of protecting the populace from undue harm and loss of property. Unfortunately, to-date this guidance has relied on the issuance of the Commander's intent for the use of airstrikes with little specific detail to restrain its use. Given the high priority of minimizing civilian casualties and the attention focused on it by the ISAF Commander, merely providing intent for the employment

of airstrikes is inadequate. The ISAF Commander should restrict airstrikes to only Type 1 Close Air Support (CAS) to mitigate civilian casualties and collateral damage.

DISCUSSION

On 2 July 2009 the Commander of ISAF in Afghanistan issued new guidance on the employment of airstrikes as a key aspect of a new strategy for the conduct of the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. This new strategy was subsequently specified in his assessment of the ISAF mission provided to the Secretary of Defense almost two months later. In that assessment, the ISAF Commander, General Stanley McChrystal, identified the key objective for the new type of warfare being conducted in Afghanistan as winning the support of the people.³ There were a multitude of specific means by which he intended to accomplish that objective, including improving governance and expanding Afghanistan's military and police forces so they had the capacity to protect the population. One of the most important means by which he intended to gain the support of the people away from the Taliban and other insurgent influences was by protecting them from violence. Specifically, he stated, "ISAF is not adequately executing the basics of counterinsurgency warfare" and stressed that one of the two "fundamental elements" critical to the new strategy was instituting a new culture within ISAF.⁴ This new culture was to focus on protecting the people of Afghanistan.⁵

Although his 2 July tactical directive preceded the completion of his comprehensive review of the mission and strategy in Afghanistan, the tactical directive was fundamental to implementing that new culture focused on protecting the population. The tactical directive remains classified, however an unclassified memorandum issued by ISAF Headquarters four days later provided releasable portions of the directive. Significantly, General McChrystal

stated, “I expect leaders at all levels to scrutinize and limit the use of force like CAS against residential compounds and other locations likely to produce civilian casualties.”⁶ He went on to say, “I cannot prescribe the appropriate use of force for every condition that a complex battlefield will produce, so I expect our force to internalize and operate in accordance with my intent.”⁷ These restrictions on the use of force did not prevent the use of artillery or CAS in self-defense; however, they very clearly established an expectation that forces will take more risk to avoid civilian casualties which would exacerbate the insurgency.

General McChrystal was correct in stating he could not provide specific guidance for the employment of CAS in every situation. However he could have provided better guidance to his forces to help them balance the often competing requirements of protecting friendly forces while minimizing civilian casualties and collateral damage. More specific guidance might have reduced the likelihood of subordinate commanders issuing further restrictive guidance to ensure their forces remained well within the boundaries of General McChrystal’s intent. Providing precise guidance for the employment of CAS is an operational imperative because specifically limiting the factors for consideration in a mentally and physically onerous situation improves decision making. Young soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines comprise a significant part of the community of Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) who are trained and qualified to employ CAS while assigned or attached to the maneuver ground force. Without precise guidance, these young JTACs often have only seconds to make extremely complex decisions, literally involving life and death, frequently while taking fire from enemy forces. The more we can limit the factors at play in their decisions, the easier it is for them to make those decisions. Easier decisions are more likely to be good decisions. As one Joint Terminal Attack Controller stated, “there’s a lot of times, . . . [when]

you've kind of got to become a lawyer. . . There's a lot of times I felt more like I was on an episode of *Law and Order* than I was a combatant."⁸ This situation is compounded in Afghanistan where relatively few ground troops have been used, in comparison to the size of the country, combined with extreme terrain that limits the employment of conventional force mobility systems, including vehicles and helicopters. These challenges have required an increased reliance on airpower to overmatch enemy firepower and protect small ground elements. The more forethought in establishing parameters and boundaries an operational commander can provide, the easier it is for friendly forces to comply with them. Specific guidance helps to ensure the split second decisions made at the tactical level are less likely to have operational and even strategic negative implications.

This is not a minor problem. Even before General McChrystal assumed command and outlined his expectations for the employment of air-to-ground fires, the Afghan populace and government leaders were decrying the death of Afghan civilians at the hands of U.S. soldiers. In mid-September 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates quickly apologized to Afghan government officials and promised to fully investigate the circumstances of reported civilian casualties caused by American forces.⁹ Highlighting how significant this issue is to the overall campaign, he apologized and promised to provide compensation to the families of the dead, even before investigations into the specific details were complete.¹⁰ While visiting Afghanistan nearly two years later, Mr. Gates was blindsided by the reported killing of ten campaign workers and injuring of an election candidate by ISAF airstrikes.¹¹ Despite the quick apologies and promises to investigate, Afghan government officials and the Afghan people remain outraged about the continuing death of their countrymen by forces that are reportedly there to provide security.¹² In fact some popular government officials have

demanded that NATO forces not only end the war and remove all their forces in Afghanistan, but also discontinue the counter-terrorist airstrikes in Pakistan against Al Qaeda leaders due to ISAF „aerial bombardment“ in Afghanistan.¹³

Shortly after General McChrystal was relieved from command of ISAF and replaced with General David H. Petraeus in June 2010, the new commander was asked whether he was going to change the rules of engagement for the employment of CAS. McChrystal’s strict guidance on the employment of airstrikes had been condemned by members of the ground forces because of their inability to employ the full capabilities of U.S. military might, exposing their forces to unnecessary risk on the battlefield. Some soldiers blatantly complained to reporters of having to fight with “one hand tied behind our back.”¹⁴ General Petraeus did in fact quickly review McChrystal’s airstrike guidance and issued an updated tactical directive on 4 August 2010. Interestingly, that directive has been characterized as both tightening and relaxing the rules put in place by General McChrystal.¹⁵ A careful reading of unclassified ISAF documents reveal little difference in intent between McChrystal’s guidance issued in July 2009 and that of Petraeus, issued 13 months later. While General Petraeus recommitted to the McChrystal priority of protecting the population first and limiting the use of airstrikes, General Petraeus included a provision in the new guidance that will result in a relaxing of the rules on the battlefield.

In announcing General Petraeus’s new tactical directive, the ISAF release prominently specifies that “subordinate commanders are not authorized to further restrict this guidance without my approval.”¹⁶ This critical provision eliminated a significant source of frustration for forces on the battlefield. Due to the lack of specificity in McChrystal’s guidance, and his emphasis on compliance with his intent down to the lowest tactical level,

the ISAF Commander's subordinate echelon commanders took it upon themselves to attempt to add the missing details and issued their own guidance to operationalize the ISAF Commander's intent.¹⁷ Further compounding this problem was that many of these subordinate commanders had an inadequate understanding of the employment of airpower and the tactics, techniques, procedures, sensors, weapons, and weapons effects used to prosecute targets.¹⁸ This misunderstanding is characterized by at least one of the subordinate commander's use of force guidance treating both mortar and artillery indirect fire synonymous with direct fire, precision airstrikes.¹⁹ In some cases, the lack of knowledge about the true capabilities of airpower results in the "mistaken idea that air-delivered munitions are somehow more inaccurate than other kinds of fire."²⁰ Adding emphasis to the heightened concern over the impact of the rules of engagement was the promise by the Congress to examine those rules to ensure the restrictions are not placing soldiers and marines at undue risk.²¹

Despite the frustration of the coalition troops, the anger of the Afghan people significantly undermines the success of ISAF operations in Afghanistan because winning the support of the population is widely considered fundamental to the conduct of a counterinsurgency. The Afghan campaign plan specifies that a main effort for population security is to, "reduce CIVCAS [civilian casualties] and other acts that create opposition among the population."²² This is supported by counterinsurgency doctrine that identifies popular support for the insurgency as the center of gravity.²³ Anything that pushes the Afghan people away from supporting ISAF forces further strengthens the insurgents there. The Army's and Marine Corps' manual for counterinsurgency specifically states, "an air strike can cause collateral damage that turns people against the host-nation (HN) government

and provides insurgents with a major propaganda victory.”²⁴ Finally, joint doctrine specifically elaborates that not only do civilian casualties and collateral damage undermine support for friendly forces by the populace, but they also undermine support for the counterinsurgency effort within the United States and internationally.²⁵ Further enlightening is the fact that the only time concern for civilian casualties is mentioned in the joint doctrine is related to airpower. While other weapons, from small arms to mortars and artillery, can and do cause civilian casualties, those caused by airpower are often more spectacular and garner more media attention. Therefore, minimizing civilian casualties and collateral damage from airstrikes is a top priority.

Given the importance of minimizing civilian casualties in counterinsurgency, and specifically in Afghanistan, there are means by which commanders can provide more specific guidance for the employment of CAS to achieve a better balance with protecting the population and minimizing U.S. and coalition troops’ exposure to unnecessary risk. As stated above, providing as much detail as reasonable to guide the employment of airstrikes is an operational imperative. Detailed guidance helps forces on the battlefield clear the „fog” of the fight and still conduct operations in accordance with the higher commander’s objectives and intent.

Joint Publication 3-09.3, *Close Air Support*, prescribes the U.S. military’s doctrine for planning and executing CAS. It defines CAS as, “air action by fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces, and requires detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces.”²⁶ CAS is not just limited to manned fixed-wing aircraft, but includes airstrikes from unmanned platforms as well. The stipulation for detailed integration is often handled by a JTAC that is

attached or assigned to the Army, Marine, special operations, or coalition maneuver force on the ground. “A JTAC is a qualified (certified) Service member who, from a forward position, directs the action of combat aircraft engaged in CAS and other air operations.”²⁷ In the absence of a JTAC, this integration can be accomplished by an Airborne Forward Air Controller (FAC(A)) who is trained to orchestrate the employment of overhead air assets consistent with the ground force commander’s direction and intent. The JTAC or FAC(A) provides a critical link between the ground and air forces in a tactical engagement. His training, experience, skill, initiative, and ingenuity are essential to the appropriate application of air-to-ground munitions that accomplish the intent of the ground force commander, while limiting collateral damage and avoiding fratricide.²⁸

The dramatic improvement in targeting sensors and weapons accuracy has presented the capability for JTACs to employ air-to-ground munitions at greater distances from friendly forces. While these engagements still use CAS procedures, they may not meet the traditional understanding of the „close proximity“ or „integrated with the fire and movement“ of a friendly ground element precepts identified in the CAS definition. Airborne weapons sensors, both manned and unmanned, coupled with enhanced real-time signals intelligence, now allow a ground force to positively identify enemy elements before they come into close proximity to the friendly element. Engaging targets that are an imminent threat to a friendly element, but prior to being in close proximity to that element, was historically referred to as battlefield air interdiction. Since battlefield air interdiction is no longer a concept in U.S. military doctrine, these targets are engaged using CAS as directed by the JTAC in concert with the ground force commander. To account for these differences between target and

friendly locations, the joint doctrine provides three parameters under which CAS is controlled: Types 1, 2, and 3.

Prior to all CAS attacks, the JTAC specifies the type attack to be used to ensure both the pilot and ground element understand the responsibilities involved with the attack. When no JTAC is available with the ground element, the joint doctrine delineates procedures for aircrews to execute CAS without a JTAC. This process is very deliberate, especially slow, and difficult. Types 1 through 3 CAS are used when JTACs are available. In Type 1, the JTAC must have visual identification of both the target and aircraft during its attack. The JTAC is responsible for ensuring the attacking aircraft is oriented towards the correct target during the attack run-in. This is the most restrictive of the CAS types and can be hampered by a lack of visibility due to daylight, weather, terrain, and the defensive posture of friendly forces.²⁹

In Type 2 CAS, the JTAC still maintains control of each individual attack, but is not required to see the target and/or acquire the aircraft during its attack run-in. If he is unable to see the target, the JTAC must obtain accurate, real-time targeting data from a forward observer, overhead aircrew, or aircraft sensor. Type 2 CAS is also used when the attacking aircraft is unable to visually identify the target prior to munitions release. In these instances, laser guided or ground positioning system navigated munitions can be employed without the aircrew visually acquiring the target. Type 2 CAS is useful in situations where targeting data is obtained by an alternate technological or human sensor and facilitates the destruction of those threats prior to their manifestation against the local friendly force.³⁰ The JTAC maintains control of individual attacks to mitigate any potential fratricide. However, the

relinquishing of responsibility for target identification by the JTAC is balanced with his inability to see the target and/or aircraft due to terrain, weather, or time of day.

The final type of CAS engagement is Type 3 CAS in which the JTAC relinquishes control of each individual attack, and approves the repeated engagement of the target with appropriate restrictions to protect friendly and non-hostile elements. The situational parameters from Type 2 are the same for Type 3: there is no requirement for the JTAC to see the target, acquire the aircraft during its attack, and/or for the aircraft to visually identify the target prior to munitions release.³¹ For instance, in Type 3 CAS the JTAC may direct an aircraft to engage positively identified troops in the open west of a recognizable ridgeline. The JTAC may further restrict the direction of attack run-ins or the duration of the entire engagement, but he does not approve each individual attack.

A good understanding of the manner by which CAS is executed shows that it spans a significant range in restrictiveness from Type 1 in which the JTAC sees both the target and the aircraft, to Type 3 where the JTAC may personally see neither and the pilot is not required to see the target prior to dropping ordnance. Although joint doctrine specifies, “specific levels of risk should not be associated with each type of terminal attack control”, clearly decreased restrictions coincide with increased risk.³² If the intent in counterinsurgency warfare, and specifically in the execution of Operation *ENDURING FREEDOM*, is to decrease the risk of civilian casualties and collateral damage then the types of CAS used provide an opportunity to smartly, but specifically and precisely, limit airstrikes to achieve the intent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing Type 1 as the standard (but not the sole) means by which CAS will be employed in Afghanistan would provide the specified command guidance desperately needed to implement the ISAF Commander's intent. Requiring that the JTAC actually see both the target and the aircraft prior to the attack adds an immeasurable degree of fidelity to an inherently confusing and indeterminate situation. This improved fidelity would reduce the instances of incorrect targeting and may often mean the difference between an attack for which ISAF later apologizes and pays reparations for, and one that eliminates an insurgent or nefarious influence from an important area.

A pertinent example of how this restriction would have better served the coalition effort in Afghanistan was the late February 2010 airstrike in Uruzgan province which reportedly killed 27 civilians, including women and children, and prompted "a furious response from Afghan officials."³³ On that day ISAF Predator crews tracked a convoy of four vehicles carrying 42 civilians for three and one-half hours prior to a ground element over seven miles away directing its lethal engagement by OH-58 Kiowa helicopters.³⁴ From over seven miles away in forbidding terrain, the JTAC was incapable of visually acquiring either the target or the attacking aircraft, meaning this attack was conducted using either Type 2 or 3 CAS.

Letting this situation develop, while still maintaining a dominant airborne sensor capability with the Predator, coupled with the immediate strike capability of the OH-58s, would likely have resulted in that convoy being assessed as non-hostile, thus saving the lives of 27 Afghan civilians. Furthermore, ISAF would have avoided an incident that fueled frustrations that undermined their counterinsurgency endeavor. Should it have turned out the vehicles contained ranks of armed fighters, the ground force could have effectively employed

their overwhelming situational awareness, fused with ground fires and Type 1 airstrikes to quickly eliminate the threat.

Certainly, the movement of a significant sized force of unknown threat moving in the direction of a small friendly force increases the risk of that element. However, a standard protocol of employing airstrikes using Type 1 procedures would have appropriately balanced the competing risks of civilian casualties and friendly force protection in this instance. Specifically, it would have removed a tool from consideration by the ground force commander along with the requirement for him to conduct an ambiguous assessment, in a stressful situation, as to whether he was in compliance with his commander's intent and the principles of counterinsurgency warfare. Implementing a tactical directive that asserted the responsibility for JTACs and ground teams to use Type 1 CAS, while still preserving the inherent responsibility for self-defense, would minimize the ambiguity and anguish forces on the battlefield currently experience due to the less than specific guidance. While this is but one example, many of the most devastating mistakes which have undermined the counterinsurgency effort occurred when Type 1 CAS was not used.³⁵

On a battlefield where improved sensors coupled with precision munitions often provide the illusion of complete situational understanding and ready availability of overwhelming strike capability, it is important to restrain those notions to be consistent with the actual capabilities. After nine years of war in Afghanistan, much of which was under-resourced in offensive force capability, the reliance on airpower has been significant.³⁶

Noted author on airpower in contemporary operations, Air Force Maj Gen Charles J. Dunlap, has written, "the profound changes in airpower's capabilities have so increased its utility that it is now often the weapon of first recourse in counterinsurgency operations."³⁷ This

confidence on the sensor capabilities and pinpoint weapons aim of the overhead platforms has sometimes resulted in an over reliance on airpower. Many of today's JTACs have ready access to the video picture from the orbiting aircraft's sensors through the Remotely Operated Video Enhanced Receiver (ROVER). Using the ROVER feed, the JTAC and the aircraft pilot can discuss the exact same picture and use that video feed as the basis for employing air-to-ground munitions.

In the interest of appropriately balancing counterinsurgency tenets with risk to force, the ISAF Commander should restrict CAS to principally Type 1. He could do this by issuing a new tactical directive which clearly establishes his expectation that forces using CAS will be required to see both the target they are engaging and the striking aircraft. Striking the correct target may still cause collateral damage, however current procedures to mitigate that through command approval, weapons selection, fusing, and attack angles and direction are adequate. Eliminating the most egregious instances of engaging incorrect targets will significantly backstop our counterinsurgency campaign. Furthermore, it should be reiterated that aircraft sensors and ROVER feeds do not adequately meet the requirement to visually acquire the target for Type 1. The ISAF Commander could enforce this expectation by mandating that all Type 2 and 3 CAS be approved at the battalion level or above. This would generate the development of standard operating procedures to ensure due diligence by the ground force prior to requesting and receiving the Type 2 or 3 approvals. Finally, the ISAF Commander must restate his commitment to the inherent responsibility for defending friendly forces to ensure ground commanders and JTACs use all the means available if necessary, even when conditions on the ground make it impossible or unreasonable to obtain permission for Type 2 or 3 CAS.

Beyond just its application to current operations in Afghanistan, this thinking should be added to counterinsurgency doctrine to better assist the future practice of counterinsurgency warfare. Counterinsurgency doctrine provides very little specifics on the employment of airpower in general, and airstrikes in particular, in support of counterinsurgency. In the widely hailed Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine, airpower is only discussed in a five-page appendix and only two paragraphs discuss airpower in the strike role.³⁸ Both paragraphs repeatedly address concerns of collateral damage and civilian casualties, but neither proposes specific means to address those challenges. The option of restricting CAS by type ought to be addressed as a technique for consideration. The broaching of this technique would allow commanders at appropriate levels to discuss its applicability to the current environment with the air commander or liaison. The Air Force doctrine for Irregular Warfare has a detailed discussion regarding the use of airpower in counterinsurgency. However, there is no mention of the types of CAS or any recommendation to consider limiting the employment of those types in counterinsurgency.

Restricting ground forces to Type 1 CAS may be viewed as requiring greater risk for those ground forces. Certainly, any restrictions on the use of force place ground forces in increased risk. But U.S. military doctrine, backed by centuries of hard lessons from warfare, asserts that minimizing collateral damage and civilian casualties is fundamental for the counterinsurgent. Minimizing civilian casualties and collateral damage places U.S. forces at increased risk to ensure the correctness of their actions. General McChrystal, and now General Petraeus, specified that increased risk was required when they implemented their tactical directives on the employment of air-to-ground munitions.³⁹ Arguing for more

specificity in their tactical directives does not mean a requirement that more risk will be accepted. It merely specifies how forces will accept the same level of risk. In fact, it is possible that this specificity would place forces in decreased risk because they have more precise guidance with which to plan their operations. No longer would they have to plan missions without a clear understanding of what is required to engage the enemy. That guidance will now be clear, and actions to meet those stipulations and mitigate risk can be planned accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Determining how much risk forces on the battlefield are required to accept is one of the commander's fundamental responsibilities. He must execute that responsibility to the best of his abilities by providing clear, concise guidance that minimizes ambiguity down the chain of command. By providing intent where specific guidance is required and feasible is, in essence, abdicating command responsibility—letting someone else lower down the chain of command make a decision. When the stakes are low, this approach is often important by providing subordinates the flexibility to find ingenious ways to solve problems.

Unfortunately, the stakes regarding CAS in Afghanistan are extremely high and regularly involve the attention and action of the senior military officer responsible, sometimes even the Secretary of Defense. Improving the specificity of the guidance for employing airstrikes is feasible and overdue.

In Afghanistan, guidance on the use of airstrikes has historically been provided by the ISAF Commander outlining his intent for the counterinsurgency effort and expressing the responsibilities of subordinate forces to appropriately limit airstrikes to effectively balance

force protection with the possibilities for collateral damage and civilian casualties. By smartly restricting CAS to principally those situations in which the ground force commander, through the JTAC, sees both the target and striking aircraft, the success of our efforts can be improved. This would present our forces with no more risk than they are already accepting.

This proposal is not solely applicable to the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. While the historical underpinnings, conditions, and characteristics of each insurgency vary, U.S. military doctrine establishes that protecting the population is a primary (if not *the* primary) goal of the counterinsurgent. Accordingly, America's counterinsurgency doctrine should add potential methods by which it can minimize collateral damage and civilian casualties through its use of airstrikes. Counterinsurgency doctrine should be modified to specifically include the idea of restricting CAS employment based on the type (for example, delegating only Type 1 CAS down to the lowest levels). This approach would provide concrete direction to unburden the joint force engaged in counterinsurgency from having to interpret an understanding of the higher commander's intent for the appropriate application of force. Results of this guidance would be expected to bolster the overall strategic objectives of a counterinsurgency campaign.

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