



Advance Social Science Archives Journal

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol.2 No.4, Oct-Dec, 2024. Page No. 73-83

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



THE IMPACT OF NATIONALISM ON SAARC'S COHESION AND FUNCTIONALITY; A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Dr. Farhana Kousar

Ph.D. in International Relations, Federal Urdu university Karachi, Pakistan

Email: farhanakausar1212@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was set up to promote economic integration among the countries of its membership. But the recent rise of nationalist movements has made challenges to the organization's cohesion and operational rhythms. This article critically examines the effect of nationalism on SAARC and how SAARC has affected border conflicts, economic competition, political interventions and socio cultural frictions among the member states. Nationalism, which often appears as very strong loyalty to one's nation and culture, can be a very big thing in undermining regional cooperation. Occasionally nationalist agendas have caused border disputes and economic rivalries to increase that serve to diminish the common goals and mutual benefits of SAARC. Political interference has also hit the roadblock of nationalist driven and has blocked critical agreements and initiatives meant to encourage regional connectivity and economic prosperity. However, the relationship between nationalism and regional cooperation is not antagonistic. If channelled properly, says this article, nationalism need not rule out regional integration. The truth is, it can even help create a strong identity and something to which the region can feel a purpose. To move out of the complex maze of nationalism, SAARC has to open dialogue, engage in deeper diplomatic interaction and expand economic linkages that have concrete benefits across national boundaries. The barriers created by nationalism can only be overcome through historical grievances that breed distrust and hatred among member states. It can also be used to contribute in the creation of a regional identity which is not competitive with national identity but rather complementary to it. This should not be the only means of using economic cooperation for mutual growth, but also should be a diplomatic tool for building trust and collaboration. However, in its entirety, nationalism is a daunting problem for SAARC, but not an insurmountable one. The future of SAARC depends upon how its member States can find a proper balance of nationalist impetus and regional co-operation. SAARC can continue to be an important instrument of peace, prosperity and development in South Asia if it adopts policies which moderate the pernicious influence of nationalism and takes a common stand on regional issues.

Keywords: SAARC, Nationalism, Regional Cooperation, Economic Integration, Border Disputes, Economic Rivalry

Introduction

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in December 1985 with the view of promoting and preserving economic and political cooperation among its eight member countries, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India,

Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Bhargava tasks the organization with reducing poverty, enhancing global economic prosperity and promoting stability in the region. However, internal conflicts, political strife and economic inequalities among the states made the regional integrating process almost impossible. Their main obstacles now remain the upsurge of nationalist movements in the countries of the region which have dispelled the goodwill that used to prevail in the organization enabling it to function effectively. Being by its very nature a nationalist concept, it promotes national interest to the exclusion of the regional or global cooperation and thereby creates frictions amongst member states, which have varied political and economic priorities (Chaturvedi 2019).

The resurgence of nationalism in South Asia, in particular in the big countries of South Asia, India and Pakistan, has contributed to the increase of political rivalries and SAARC has not made any or little progress in the process. India is the biggest member of SAARC, and as the country increasingly adopts a more assertive nationalist agenda under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it's moving its focus away from the regional body. Relations with neighbouring Pakistan, a major player in the region, have been particularly strained over prickly matters such as Kashmir. Nevertheless SAARC's future has been undermined by a deepening distrust between the two countries, which sometimes spills over into SAARC meetings, and its member countries have not been able to reach consensus on regional issues (Kumar 2021). For instance, SAARC summits have been frequently abandoned or postponed due to political currents. Furthermore, the nationalist rhetoric has given more importance to bilateral relations at the cost of multilateral forums like SAARC, thus reducing the ability of the organization to foster regional integration (Rahman 2020).

SAARC is not exclusively under India and Pakistan's control, but nationalism's grip on the organization has permeated still other member states, who were themselves complicit in the rise of nationalist movements that prevented them from interacting with the organization. For instance, nationalist sentiments have led to policies that put domestic first above regional cooperation (Jayawardena 2021), as in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Such a parochial attitude among member states has made SAARC an also run in areas such as trade liberalization, poverty reduction and climate change, where such an organization was expected to make a significant difference. Additionally, nationalist movements have exacerbated historical grievances and territorial disputes within SAARC, making it difficult for the regional body to act as a cohesive entity to address pressing regional concerns (Choudhary 2019). The rise of nationalism in South Asia thus significantly weakens the organization's capacity to facilitate at least some form of meaningful regional cooperation, and that poses questions over its future relevance and effectiveness.

Nationalism and Regional Cooperation: A Contradiction

In general, nationalism is a political ideology, which means it puts first the nation state and its specificity by language, culture, religion, or history (Anderson 2016). Such interests tend to be country specific, and often adverse to broader regional or global interests. Nationalism can bring a nation together and make them proud, but national

pride makes them hard to work together in regional cooperation. Because the tenets of regional organizations are based on principles of shared decision making, collective action and compromise, a focus on national sovereignty and self-determination can often collide with the objectives of the organization. As a result, the inherently inward looking nature of nationalism makes it difficult for member states to align its policies and interests to common objectives, as tension ensues in the SAARC (Smith 2019).

If nationalist sentiments result in competition, rivalry or even hostility against other countries the potential for conflict increases. Nationalism can easily whip up long standing animosities, particularly where there is a territorial dispute or historical grievance (Gellner 2018), and regional cooperation seems almost unimaginable. For instance, the contest of the nationalist's ideologies and claims of territories over Kashmir in South Asia have made it hard for SAARC to strive integration.

In addition to these two nations fighting against each other militarily, they have also made SAARC deadwood. Such disputes also point to the basic contradiction between nationalism on the one hand and the purpose of regional organizations that are supposed to cross borders and promote common prosperity on the other. Nationalist ideologies are also known to tend towards inward focus at the expense of regional cooperation and support for domestic priorities. Most countries' nationalist politics create policies that favor policies of sovereignty, culture, and national economic independence over regional ones (Breuille 2021). This is an example, for instance, in which member states are not fully participating in SAARC's trade liberalization efforts due to fear that they will have no control over the economy, or the domestic industries, to the bigger, more dominant countries. One of SAARC's founding goals — regional economic integration — has been stalled by this nationalist, protectionist attitude. Nationalism may help a nation become stronger and more united but it also helps causes division amongst states and hinders their ability to work cohesively together for the betterment of the areas they exist in.

The Impact of Nationalism on SAARC

Nationalism was very much affected by SAARC and the nationalism has been taken to a greater height of border dispute, economic rivalry, political interference and social tensions among the SAARC member states. Border disputes are one of the biggest problems, and they are yet to be resolved. An example is the territorial conflict between India and Pakistan with Kashmir as a point of contention, with nationalism feeding in both countries and preventing regional cooperation (Pant 2020). In fact, the tensions between India and Nepal, particularly over the Kalapani region, have derailed SAARC's efforts to promote collective dialogue (Khadka 2021), and have similarly strained bilateral relations. Most of such border disputes are rooted in historical grudges, nationalist narrative that puts premium on territorial integrity as opposed to regional collaboration, and hence it has been difficult to move beyond a dead end in addressing the issue of genuine cooperation.

The second reason why nationalism affected SAARC is that it is an economic rivalry. Since economic disparities exist between the member states, especially between the larger economies, India and the smaller economies, Nepal, Bhutan or the Maldives

(Rana 2019), competition rather than cooperation is felt. This economic competition, sometimes made more bitter by nationalist policies and always driven by economic competition, leads the member states to lean more toward their national interests (like protecting local industries or holding control over trade routes) rather than to regional economic integration. For instance, South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) trade agreements within SAARC have not achieved much success as the countries have been protecting themselves through nationalist concerns over economic sovereignty (Basu 2021). The pollution of the atmosphere of cooperation with the drive for national economic self-sufficiency and the desire to retain competitive advantages vis a vis neighboring countries stymie SAARC's economic goals.

The political interference added with the rising nationalism makes it complicated for SAARC to create regional stability. Nationalist movements can encourage governments to adopt assertive policies, including meddling in neighbouring countries' domestic affairs. Even if the accusations of political interference in the internal politics of Nepal and Sri Lanka, justified by nationalist rhetoric, have not been justified, it has made the SAARC member states distrustful of India's increasing role in their internal politics (Wijesinha 2020). The very purpose of these actions is to dilute the political sovereignty of the smaller states, and to permanently mar the climate of suspicion and antagonism within the Organization, which makes it impossible to use SAARC as a neutral platform where we can discuss regional issues. Moreover, nationalist rhetoric can make these intra-border and inter-border social and cultural conflicts worse. For example, the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh and Myanmar has been exacerbated by nationalist narratives that undermine human rights and exacerbate regional fissures (Rahman 2021). This dynamics reveal how nationalism can exacerbate cultural and social divides, rendering difficult the process of building trust and cooperation in SAARC.

SAARC's Response to Border Disputes: Negotiation and Diplomacy

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed to foster cooperation and peace among the member nations of SAARC. Yet, SAARC's mission cannot be fulfilled, despite the fact that it has unresolved border disputes. The history of the region is one of territorial conflicts, including Kashmir between India and Pakistan, and Nepal, Bhutan and China. In response to these complexities, SAARC has employed a mixture of negotiation and diplomatic techniques to foster dialogue and peaceful resolution of border disputes. The charter of SAARC has one of the core principles – peaceful resolution of disputes between member states. Bilateral discussions between SAARC members can address the contentious issues because the many border disputes have their historical roots and have links to nationalist sentiments (Pant 2020).

It's not a body which is able to pass resolutions, but is a forum where countries can say what they think and what they can do to solve the problem. Recognizing the regional context of SAARC (Kumar 2021), for example, India and Bangladesh sorted out long standing maritime and land border disputes bilaterally culminating them with the signing of Land Boundary Agreement in 2015. These cases show that SAARC can

be a forum for dialogue in spite of contentious member state histories. SAARC has taken confidence building measures (CBMs) as its main effort to reduce tension over border disputes. CBMs are useful in areas where militarization and legacy grievances may lead to increase in conflict (Naseer 2019).

Initiatives such as joint border management and regular communication between military officials have been promoted to improve transparency and cut the risk of escalation. But in this case, the hotlines that have been set up by the border forces of India and Pakistan have acted as a shield to prevent their border forces from misunderstanding each other and keep the peace in that disputed area. On the broader implications of border disputes, security and stability, SAARC has the potential as well to use the regional cooperation. Incentives for member states to peacefully resolve disputes are offered by integration of border management into more general regional structures, such as trade and economic cooperation. As a case of how economic interdependence can reduce tensions by providing member states of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) common interests in contrast to the nationalist competition (Basu 2021).

Since countries' economic ties become closer, and they tend to settle border disputes peacefully to keep the benefits of cooperation, this might be particularly true. However, SAARC's negotiation and diplomatic efforts to resolve border disputes will only be successful if the member states' political will is directed in prudently resolving border disputes. However, dialogue can be superseded by nationalism, as countries may be more willing to push for territorial integrity and national interests, rather than regional cooperation. SAARC has to strive to promote the culture of dialogue and understanding and the long term benefits of peaceful resolutions over short term nationalistic gains (Jha 2020). But border disputes create huge challenges for SAARC and the organization focuses on negotiation, diplomacy and confidence building measures to ensure the peaceful resolution. Dialogue and economic interdependence of SAARC member states, as well as SAARC, can promote regional stability and cooperation in South Asia and thus contribute to a peace.

SAARC's Response to Nationalism

The rising nationalism of the member states has posed a challenge to the South Asian association for regional cooperation SAARC. To this effect, extremely well-established plans for dialogue, border issues as well as asking for eventual economic integration have been laid down by SAARC. These attempts have been created in response to the resurgence of nationalism and the efforts to increase the level of communication and cooperation among the member states many of whom hold divergent national priorities. Nonetheless, such initiatives have been contradicted by the unrelenting nationalism which forbids any such steps towards regionalism as infringing on national sovereignty.

Encouraging communication and collaboration of SAARC member states has been the some of the prominent SAARC's constructive reactions to the rise of nationalism. From 1985, which was the year of its establishment, South African political leaders have been convening at the SAARC, where different problems affecting the SAARC region has

been discussed. It is a forum for the member countries to sit together, seek out peaceful negotiations and resolution of differences through annual summits of the body.

The SAARC forums have been utilized to foster a sense of unity and cooperation as a way to alleviate the adverse effects of Nationalism (Jha 2020). It has underscored that there is a need to combat the challenges faced by the region including poverty, terrorism, and even the climate in spite of the increasing issues in the world that demand in assistance. The member states of SAARC can also discuss about common issues instead of the extremism of nationalism driven from all the state's attitude towards its sovereignty. San Jose, Costa Rica, August 2 to 4, 2008. For example, the SAARC Social Charter has high turnover of activities. The member states have to undertake enumerative classifying cooperative actions. These are health, education, and social welfare and these activities form the organization's regional approach and understanding of the needs of all member states (Kumar 2021).

Peaceful means and negotiation have also been used by SAARC to resolve border disputes. The many member states with long standing border disputes that go back to nationalist ideology include India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. These territorial disputes make regional cooperation very difficult given that they can so readily be used as rallying points for nationalist movements. While SAARC has no power to enforce its resolutions to such disputes, it has been of encouraging bilateral and multilateral talks which lead to peaceful solutions (Pant 2020). An example of such confidence building measures would be the manner in which India and Bangladesh have been able to reduce tensions over the sharing of River water which had reached a stalemate in the 1980s and was followed by the Ganges Water Treaty (Rahman 2021). But SAARC has made its presence felt by promoting peaceful negotiation to resolve such differences, to prevent such conflicts from escalating and maintain channels of communication between the member states.

The economic integration has also tried to reduce the negative effect of nationalism from SAARC. Economic rivalry between member states has also stirred nationalist policies, in which countries have raised their own economic interests above regional cooperation. SAARC has taken several initiatives in the response to promote regional trade and investment. The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was established by SAARC in 2006 (Kumar 2021) and is SAARC's most ambitious project of economic integration. SAFTA is intended to lower tariffs and trade barriers to promote a more integrated South Asian economy to the point that growing economic interdependence will offset nationalistic competition driven. Despite politicians and protectionist policies, SAFTA has been a bit of a rocky road, but it is still a crucial component of SAARC's attempt to resist nationalism. Regional infrastructure development and energy cooperation as well as further economic integration have been facilitated by SAARC. The aim is to use these initiatives to turn positive shared economic benefits against nationalism isolation. Projects to promote economic collaboration amongst member states include SAARC Energy Grid and the promotion of regional transport networks (Rana 2019). However, these initiatives have failed because of political

conflicts, especially the reluctance of several member states to continue fully with regional integration. But success has been limited by the power of nationalism which has been countered by SAARC through dialogue, negotiation and economic integration. But none of that has really helped the organization get to its feet yet — it's still struggling, especially trying to resolve border disputes and encourage economic cooperation. Yet SAARC remains a valuable forum for dialogue and cooperation for the South Asian region in the promotion of peace and security in South Asia.

Economic Cooperation as a Tool for Reducing Nationalist Tensions

When South Asian countries are engaged in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), economic cooperation has become a crucial tool to attenuate nationalist tensions between them. Nationalism tends to favor national interests and sovereignty, and therefore leads member states to compete, distrust and conflict with each other. Yet, by establishing economic ties, SAARC can provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation, and provide the impetus for nations to concentrate on mutual gain instead of nationalist rhetoric. Economic integration initiatives, for example, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), promote the free flow of trade and investment among member states, and help reduce the attractiveness of protectionist policies (Kumar 2021). The most obvious way to alleviate nationalist tensions through economic cooperation is to show how collaboration can provide real benefits. Trade and investment between countries creates economic interdependencies that act as a stabilizing force in the region. For example, increased trade between India and Bangladesh might increase goodwill as both sides would enjoy increased economic relations (Rahman 2021). Further, joint ventures and collaborative projects can work to build trust and rapport between member states, countering the harmful effects of nationalist agendas. Standing on economic initiatives that create jobs, develop infrastructure, raise living standards and contribute to shared prosperity can turn attention away from national grievances toward common prosperity.

Additionally, economic cooperation can be used as a diplomatic tool to address contentious issues and historical grievances. For instance, regional projects like the SAARC Energy Grid are developed to improve energy cooperation among member countries by sharing resources and infrastructure (Basu 2021). Initiatives like these can lead to a feeling of belonging and the need to collaborate as countries come together to solve the common issues instead of fighting over historical grievances. SAARC can help diffuse nationalist sentiments and promote a more cooperative regional environment by focusing on areas in which mutual interests in issues such as energy security and resource management are present. However, the success of economic cooperation in containing nationalist tensions largely depends on the will of member states to subordinate national interests to regional cooperation. Protectionist policies that inhibit trade and investment are often nationalist sentiments, and can undermine the benefits to be derived from economic integration. In order to maximize economic cooperation among SAARC member states, they must find ways to reduce trade barriers, encourage spirit of cooperation, and resolve political conflicts through

dialogue (Naseer 2019). If they can do so, they can make the environment more conducive to economic cooperation and can help reduce nationalist tensions and, as a consequence, can create a more stable and prosperous South Asia. An important strategy to counteract the ill effects of nationalism in SAARC is economic cooperation. Member states can come together by focusing on mutual benefits and creating an interdependence that helps them to overcome historical grievances and a shared future.

Challenges and Opportunities

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a rising impediment to the attainment of this goal and an opportunity to enhance regional cooperation. The absence of historical grievances to be fuelled by nationalist impulses between member states is the primary obstacle facing SAARC. A lot of SAARC countries had a shared past of colonialism, partition and border wars, like India and Pakistan, or Bangladesh and Myanmar. These unresolved issues are often used by nationalist movements to become rallying points, making it hard for SAARC to evolve a spirit of cooperation (Pant 2020).

Among others, the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan is still an enmity that frustrates SAARC's motive of regional unity. Lack of trust among member states coupled with these historical grievances will be necessary to overcome nationalist tensions and create more effective cooperation. But it can also be a way to combat divisive nationalist sentiments with a feeling of regional identity. The idea of commonalities on the basis of cultural, historic, and economic ties can be promoted as the utilization of SAARC instead of the distinctiveness of a nation's identity in many (if not most) cases. Great vehicles for showcase of commonalities between member's states have been provided by the Cultural Festival of SAARC and South Asian Games for exchange of culture to cross the border (Rana 2019). And SAARC can help in diluting divisive rhetoric of nationalism by talking about what binds people of South Asia together rather than what divides them. Moreover, education and media efforts concerning shared regional history, art, and literature can help foster a shared regional identity. In this sense, creating such a regional identity is far from a straightforward reaction against nationalism and, more interestingly, should contribute to the political will for a deeper form of cooperation in regional affairs.

Economic cooperation is another big opportunity that can work in the face of nationalism rise to counter it and maintain regional balance. This can be used as incentive to persuade member states not to favour nationalist rivalry over regional collaboration, with the tangible benefits of economic collaboration – such as increased trade, investment and job creation. An example of this is the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), wherein economic integration can bring both gains to the parties, even in the face of political disagreements (Kumar 2021). Thus, SAARC should be able to generate economic interdependence among its member states which will bring about a sense of common interest and counter the pull of the nationalist rhetoric largely invoking protectionism and self-reliance. Energy projects such as SAARC Energy Grid can also produce mutual economic benefits and goodwill and collaboration between

borders. By using economic cooperation as a means towards regional unity and facilitating economic cooperation among all nations of the region, SAARC has the potential to not only to reduce the impact of nationalism but also to promote peace and prosperity in South Asia.

SAARC in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is in a position where it faces a number of diverse opportunities as well as challenges. It was founded in 1985 with the aim among other things of propagating regional co-operation, economic cooperation and development among its member states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. However, to this day, SAARC has been unable to deal efficiently with some modern-day challenges such as nationalism, economic inequality, climate change, and security matters as the...world has emerged and so have the contours of South Asia. If its member's states are concerned, then nationalism is one of the prominent factors that poses a challenge to SAARC in the 21st century. Historically belonging to this region, however, nationalism has been a source for discord and in many instances wars, especially between India and Pakistan, and has hindered coming to agreement on key issues in the agreement as well as carrying out cooperative duties (Pant 2020).

Religious and linguistic ties among SAARC members bolstered a sense of unity which at the present is no longer the case as many individual countries have adopted more protectionist policies and have shown more and more unwillingness to participate in some regional initiatives propelled by nationalist movements. SAARC has been unable to realize its objectives because of the unwillingness and lack of commitment of some member states to put regional cooperation above national interests. The focus of SAARC in the 21st century emphasizes on economic integration. The establishment was aimed to enhance trade between the member countries under the South Asian free trade structure member countries but due to political rivalry among the countries has progressed slowly. This however, such potential for economic unity remains.

South Asia, facing issues of poverty, unemployment and under development, the idea of increased economic collaboration can yield real benefits in the form of tangible alleviation of some of the socio economic disparities which fuel regional tensions (Kumar 2021). SAARC can potentially bring the interdependence that could counteract the effects of nationalism, and make the regional environment more stable, if it concentrates on trade, investment and joint economic projects. Apart from economic integration, SAARC has faced the difficult challenge of climate change and environmental sustainability. Due to the problems that climate change will bring, South Asia is particularly vulnerable. These challenges need to be addressed through joint action and cooperation between member states (Basu 2021).

SAARC can serve as a catalyst for climate adaptation and sustainable development-led initiative that could bring together member states around a common objective, building on a sense of regional identity that cuts across national agendas. SAARC could use the common objectives regarding the environment to develop cooperation over such issues as resource management, disaster preparedness and renewable energy

development. Security threats, particularly terrorism and regional conflicts, are a major impediment to the effectiveness of SAARC. Politically sensitive issues are not tackled comprehensively by the organization due to which they have been criticized for failing to address security issues comprehensively (Jha 2020). However, stability in the region would be enhanced through a cooperative approach to security (intelligence sharing, counter terrorism efforts, and conflict resolution). SAARC can deal with these critical issues by giving top priority to collective security measures and building a culture of trust and cooperation among member states. Challenges and opportunities mark the role of SAARC in the 21st century. Yet regional cooperation is hindered by nationalism, but economic integration, climate change and security collaboration may lead to renewed engagement among member states. SAARC can reiterate its importance as a regional cooperation platform by focusing on shared interests and addressing common challenges and thereby help contribute to the long term peace, stability and prosperity of South Asia.

Conclusion

The case of nationalism as a threat to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) cohesion and timely functioning has a couple of challenges. The organization has faced setbacks in the promotion of regional cooperation due to the existence of territorial and economic competition together with social frictions that have arisen from the upsurge of nationalism. A classic example of such consolidation was the fact that due to the overriding national concerns of each member country, SAARC was becoming less active in dealing with such regional issues as trade, border conflicts and even security. Still, SAARC has status of an important arena for political dialogue, economic cooperation and integration within the processes of regional development and stability. Training as such an organization that pulls up goodwill and violence boycott solutions to issues including to those from nations is SAARC's key response to the threat of nationalism. There has been no suppression of ethnic tensions and peaceful resolution of conflicts due to the existence of SAARC. This is important especially in the light of many retained territorial grievances which are likely to be the core of conflicts in the region. And the organization's endorsement of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) brings economic cooperation to upstage the ethnic rivalry. The economic advantages that accrue from within the area of trade and investments can incentivize member countries to view the collective good as more beneficial than the narrow 'self-welfare' caused by protectionism. Even though nationalism is still a great constraint, it can be overcome, as it is the case of SAARC, through dialogue, increased economic interdependence and a development of regional identity. Until of these strategies are pursued within SAARC, the prospects of lasting peace, stability and prosperity in the region will remain elusive.

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