

The Baltic Sea Region at an Inflection Point

By G. Alexander Crowther

The unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, catapulted conventional military operations to the forefront of Western security thinking, re-kindled serious contemplation of major war in Europe, and galvanized dramatic re-thinking among Western countries about how to secure and protect democratic governance which has become the norm in the transatlantic region. Alarm and fear are perhaps most acutely felt in the Baltic Sea and adjoining regions which share extended borders with Russia and have suffered Russian and Soviet domination for centuries. Russian President Vladimir Putin, seeking to reverse the tide of NATO expansion and to dominate a sphere of influence resembling that of the defunct Soviet Union, has inadvertently catalyzed what German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called “Zeitenwende”—a major inflexion point in global geopolitics resulting in fundamental political re-alignments.

The Putin regime uses all the elements of Russian national power to gain its political and strategic objectives. However, the most immediate threat to peace, stability, and security in the Baltic Sea region is Russian political warfare. This warfare is waged in the so-called gray zone, where actions though aggressive do not cross the threshold of armed attack or a use of force as defined and proscribed in the Charter of the United Nations and international law. Russia and its accomplices including China, Iran, and North Korea utilize a variety of deniable and difficult-to-attribute means including information operations, cyber operations, and criminal operations to achieve strategic advantage. The complexity of this challenge can only be fully appreciated by examining the many elements of national power including diplomatic, information, military, economic, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, political, social, and infrastructure. Western analysts commonly refer to this model by the acronym DIMEFILPSI.

Putin clearly seeks to destabilize states in the transatlantic alliance and to fracture the two organizations that provide the greatest challenge to Russian influence: the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While the Baltic states themselves are the most directly threatened by Russia,

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the Baltic Sea “north shore”—comprised of Sweden, Finland, and Norway—is also challenged: Sweden and Finland are members of the EU but not NATO while Norway is a member of NATO but not a member of the EU. Sweden and Finland have historically cooperated closely with NATO and are currently in the queue to join the alliance while Norway is closely integrated into the EU common market via the European Economic Area (EEA). There remain substantial differences of perspective—though in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine these may be converging.

A leitmotif within Russian strategic thinking is that war is the natural state of relations between states and that the West has been at war with Russia—historically and especially since the 1990s—and deploys information operations to achieve regime change in states aligned with Russia and in Russia itself. This perception of a constant state of war justifies doing whatever is necessary to achieve Russian political goals: “the ends justify the means.” This belief obviates any need for separate strategies for different means; there is one comprehensive strategy using techniques ranging from non-violent competition to kinetic operations. Examples include cyber-attacks against Estonia in 2007, conventional warfare against Georgia in 2008, a combination of information and deniable military operations against Ukraine in 2014, and ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya as proxy attacks on Western interests. Such operations have been described over the years as “active measures,” “reflexive control,” “hybrid warfare,” the “Gerasimov Doctrine,” and “gray-zone operations.” Each term has its advocates and critics. The Russian label for these operations is “New Generation Warfare.”

As these operations do not exceed the threshold of armed combat—typically resulting in damage or destruction of property and infrastructure as well as human casualties—international law does not sanction military retaliation. As states committed to

the rule of law EU and NATO countries are bound by these constraints of international law. Conversely, authoritarian states such as Russia use law as a tool of oppression—they are sometimes referred to as “rule-by-law” as opposed to rule of law states—and are not so constrained.

Prior to Russia’s February invasion of Ukraine, not everyone agreed that the Russian Federation was a strategic threat. Even today, states have diverse perceptions of the Russia threat, and attitudes towards engaging Russia range from “NATO should intervene in Ukraine” to “we should not humiliate Russia.” The three Baltic states, Poland, and Finland feel Russia’s recent bellicosity vindicates their past insistence on focusing on Russia as the main strategic threat. Finland, unlike so many others, never disarmed or dismantled its defense architecture at the end of the Cold War.

As might be expected, Russians have a different perspective on the region and its history. The regime sees itself as the victim and the guardian of Christianity, conservative values, and Orthodox civilization. They also believe that the current global system was designed by the West and operates to marginalize them. Putin’s response is to seek to destabilize that system using political warfare.

Political Warfare

Russia has historically been an active practitioner of political warfare. Its recent, somewhat surprising, military shortcomings in Ukraine have taken the imminent threat of conventional intervention off the table for the foreseeable future, leaving Putin even more dependent on political warfare. The Western allies and partners must recognize and prepare for this and continue working tirelessly to frustrate those efforts.

The Soviet Union used political warfare from the very beginning. According to American expert Stephen Blank:

The legendary tactical flexibility of the Soviet regime derives from their conceptualization of conflict as being waged on all fronts or across the board—whence the internal structure of the protagonists becomes the center of gravity. The Bolshevik vision of politics as another form of warfare endowed its practitioners with the maximum feasible number of instruments with which to wage their struggle even in the face of superior enemy military power.¹

The American diplomat George Kennan pioneered the American concept of political warfare. Kennan wrote:

Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP [the Economic Recovery Plan, better known as the Marshall Plan]), and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.²

Building on Kennan in a way, but trying to analyze and describe evolving tactics and military operations in the first decade of the 21st century from a military perspective, American strategist Frank Hoffman wrote:

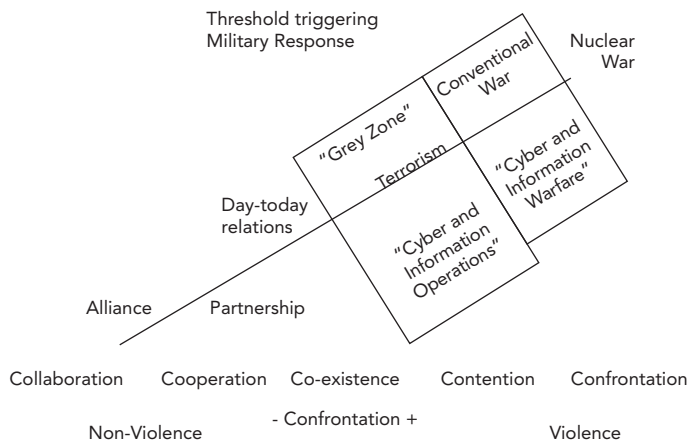
Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and

criminal disorder . . . to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict. The effects can be gained at all levels of war.³

Though Hoffman was not describing a Russian approach to conflict Russian strategists viewed this concept through the lens of what they thought the United States was inflicting on them, particularly in the guise of "Color Revolutions." To this Russian strategists then added significant elements of information operations, reflecting their long historical use of information as a weapon, and the belief that the USSR collapsed due to a concerted information campaign directed against it. This potent mix resulted in what could be called "hybrid warfare with Russian characteristics."

Political warfare is often described as operating in the "gray zone." The term was used by then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work in an April 2015 speech at the U.S. Army War College.⁴ Scholar Michael Mazarr identifies those who are operating in the gray zone as "revisionist or dissatisfied powers . . . in the market for options to transform the status quo."⁵ Gray zone operations are those below the threshold of "use of force" or "armed attack" as described in the Charter of the United Nations.⁶ If and when an offending state crosses that threshold the target state is then permitted to deploy all its elements of national power including armed force in self defence (see figure).

Political warfare, hybrid warfare, and gray zone conflict all attempt to describe "a form of strategy that leverages all of the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic capabilities at a nation's disposal to achieve its strategic objectives."⁷ Throughout the Cold War the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Peoples Republic of China all used political warfare extensively. After a brief interval following the end of the Cold War, during Russia's re-building, and China's integration into the global political and economic marketplace, this war

Figure: The Spectrum of Competition and the Grey Zone

is being waged again, and with intensity. As Putin burns through the Russian military and Russia suffers from international isolation and economic sanctions political warfare will be Putin's most dependable tool against the West. Therefore, the Western countries must prepare for more, not less, political warfare.

A problem for the West is that its strongest tool, NATO, is not designed to deter or to wage political warfare. Although military forces obviously play an important role in deterring the more violent elements of competition, it is the EU that possesses the tools necessary to face the challenges of political warfare, namely internal hard power, internal soft power, and external soft power. Although the EU has to date not been successful in deterring Russian political warfare, it holds the keys to success due to its control of these distinctive forms of power.

Deterring political warfare is very challenging as the United States and its allies and partners have discovered the hard way in recent years. Deterrence by punishment has proven ineffective as Russia appears willing to absorb the escalation—adverse, constrained retaliation of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation allowed by international law. What is left for the West is deterrence by

denial—preventing Russia from achieving its political objectives through political warfare. Although the military has a place in this deterrence, “left of bang analyses” emphasize non-military preparedness, focusing on resilience, as part of a so-called “comprehensive approach,” “comprehensive defense,” or “total defense.”

The Baltic States

As states that were violently occupied by the Soviet Union, the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—believe Russia to be an existential threat; they share this point of view with several other EU and NATO members. They fear however that many in the EU and NATO still do not understand the extent of the Russian threat and its potential consequences; therefore, they have conducted a coordinated awareness campaign to convince their allies and partners that Russia is indeed a serious threat not only to the Baltic states but to Europe and other democratic states as well.

Estonia's application of the instruments of power in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has mirrored its peacetime practices. It has invested most heavily in building resilience, especially in the military domain. It has also sought to work closely

with international partners, often taking forward-leaning positions with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

Russia's escalation in Ukraine gave Latvian leaders a political opportunity to develop and deepen Latvia's defense strategy and build resilience. It resulted in greater political support for implementing certain internal policies to reduce Russian influence while at the same time deepening the reorientation of the economy to the West. It also resulted in Latvia assuming a more prominent role in external affairs, working closely with its Baltic neighbors and Poland to achieve common strategic goals.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine redeemed Lithuania's long-standing threat assessment of Russian expansionism while signaling that the country's security policy direction—to deploy total defense initiatives, modernize armed forces and deepen NATO interconnectivity—was correct all along. The war merely accelerated Vilnius' decision-making on defense and sped up the implementation of key priority policies.

The Baltic states have a lot in common, yet each is unique with three different languages bearing legacies of distinct cultures. Estonia is Finno-Ugric and looks north. Lithuania, a millennium-old nation, was once in a commonwealth with Poland and looks south. Estonia and Latvia have large Russian minorities while Lithuania has small Polish and Russian minorities which are ideologically more in line with the native Lithuanians than typically is the case of Russian minorities. All three were part of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union; all three are now members of both NATO and the EU.

Like all post-Soviet/Warsaw Pact states, they cherish their independence. They are all small states geographically and demographically. Estonia is twice as large as New Hampshire with a population of 1.3 million; roughly the same as Dallas, Texas or Hannover, Germany. Latvia is slightly larger than

West Virginia with a population of 1.9 million making it larger than Phoenix, Arizona, or Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Lithuania is also the size of West Virginia and has a population of 2.8 million, roughly as large as Chicago or Munich.

Although they are developed countries, their small size makes it difficult for the Baltic states to field large militaries. They therefore maintain modest professional forces, augmented in times of crisis by large-scale mobilization. Their militaries share the common mission to deter Russian overt kinetic operations by denial, holding off Russian advances until reinforcements arrive under NATO's Article 5 collective defense clause. Each hosts a multinational NATO battle group as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence mission. All three depend on the "whole-of-society" approach in which the armed forces have *a* role but not *the* role in achieving resilience to prepare for and respond to Russian aggression. Externally, they each participate in international frameworks and organizations as part of a whole of international society approach. They also cooperate with each other. None seeks to lead the trio; nor would any tolerate the others doing so. However, they have worked together closely diplomatically and on synchronized awareness and advocacy campaigns in Europe and the United States achieving favorable policy outcomes within both NATO and the United States.

The North Shore

The north shore countries—Sweden, Finland, and Norway—have much in common, yet they have not always aligned in international relations. Norway was a founding member of NATO but is not a member of the EU while Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995 and resisted NATO membership until Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Their application for NATO membership signifies a fundamental shift in security relations in the region and one of the biggest changes for modern Finland and Sweden.

The north shore countries share a common concern about the security challenge posed by Russia, but their threat perceptions vary somewhat. As with the south shore countries—Poland, Germany, and Denmark—even modest distance from Russia diminishes threat perceptions. History also plays a part in this. Russia defeated Sweden in the Northern Wars in 1721 however friction continued between the two until 1809 when Sweden was defeated in the Finnish War and Russia annexed Finland. The Grand Duchy of Finland remained a principality in the Russian Empire from 1809 until achieving independence in 1917. Finland fought two wars with the Soviet Union: the 1939–40 Winter War and the 1941–44 Continuation War. Though Finland put up fierce resistance these ended with Finland losing 10 percent of its territory to the Soviets. Together these experiences led Finland to an extremely cautious attitude toward Russia and to invest in hard power to deter a third war with its giant eastern neighbor, a practice they continued in the post-Cold War era.

Sweden viewed the Soviet Union as the main threat during the Cold War, but when the Cold War ended Swedish defense policy stopped focusing on Moscow and Sweden began to dismantle its extensive Cold War defense apparatus. This changed drastically in the wake of Russia's aggressive operations in Ukraine in 2014 which served as a wake-up call and reminder of the Russia threat. Swedish defense leaders understand that they own the key terrain of the Baltic Sea with the island of Gotland which was demilitarized in the wake of the Cold War; the Gotland Regiment was reactivated in 2018, 13 years after its post-Cold War deactivation. Although historically Sweden has worked closely with Finland and partnered with both the United States and NATO the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was a sufficient shock to reverse 200 years of Sweden's history of non-alignment when Sweden applied in May 2022 for NATO membership.

The Sweden/Finland diplomatic and security relationship is very close, and they coordinate their foreign policies, including their relationships with both NATO and the United States. Even before applying to join NATO, they cooperated very closely with NATO through the special "30+2" program while both stated that, were they to seek membership, they would strongly prefer to apply and join together, as they eventually did in May 2022. They also have a trilateral security relationship with the United States codified in an MOU signed in 2017 by the three Ministers of Defense.

Much like Finland, Norway has pursued a dual policy of deterrence and "reassurance" towards Moscow since the 1940s, seeking security by membership through collective defense in NATO but also by considering Soviet/Russian security sensibilities. Norway has never fought a war with Russia and the Finnmark region (the region of Norway abutting Russia) was the only territory liberated by the Soviets that was freely and quickly returned at the end of World War II. Norway has sought pragmatic cooperation with Russia on several areas of common interest, such as fishing, environmental issues, and search and rescue. This does not mean that Norway's national security policy is accommodationist, indeed they invest heavily in military capabilities (including purchases of the F-35 and the P-8), maintain war plans to defend Norwegian territory from Russian attack, have expanded the security apparatus on their border with Russia, and participate in the German-led NATO Enhanced Forward Presence battle group in Lithuania.

Externally, Norway tends to focus on the North Sea and partnerships with other Atlantic naval players, particularly the UK and the United States. Both their national treasure (in the form of North Sea oil) and their lines of communication for external support run west. Norway also hosts the U.S. Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway (MCPN) brigade combat set that serves to support U.S.

operations and exercises in Europe and the Middle East as well as serving as prepositioned equipment in case of regional combat operations.

While there are differences between the three north shore states there are many similarities. They share a common Scandinavian heritage. Both Finland and Norway were ruled by Sweden at one point, indeed Norway only became independent from Sweden in 1905. Unfortunately, this as well as Sweden's dismantling of its total defense system after the Cold War and its skepticism toward NATO membership have sometimes strained Norwegian-Swedish security cooperation. The very word "union" has a negative connotation in Norwegian because it is so closely associated with the 1814-1905 union with Sweden. Nevertheless, the three states do cooperate (together with Denmark and Iceland) very closely through the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) framework. NORDEFECO is designed to encourage cooperation, strengthen the participating nations' national defense, explore synergies, and facilitate efficient common solutions. Since 2014 NORDEFECO has also emphasized working together in crisis and wartime, to strengthen defense and deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.

Another factor that binds these three countries is that they each use some variant of what can be called the comprehensive approach, based on a whole-of-government or more ambitiously a whole-of-society approach to security threats.

The South Shore

The south shore countries—Poland, Germany, and Denmark—have significantly distinctive views on Baltic Sea security. While the Baltic countries are strictly focused on the Russia threat and the north shore countries have similar outlooks on security as well as enjoying important cultural alignments as Scandinavians, the south shore is culturally heterogeneous and has different historical, geographical, and economic perspectives on national,

regional, and global security. While Poland tends to have a regional focus seeing Russia as a pacing threat, Germany has a more global perspective and has internal divisions over whether Russia is a threat at all. Denmark is more closely aligned with the North Shore states sharing their Scandinavian history and culture and like Norway is west- and Atlantic-oriented.

These perspectives are the result of both geography and history. Russia and Poland share a mutual hatred going back centuries; Poland took advantage of the Russian "time of troubles" and occupied Moscow from 1610 to 1612, and the Polish king sought the Russian throne. Russians remembered this and (together with Austria and Prussia) dismantled Poland in the late 18th century, integrating the rump of Poland into the Russian Empire and sought to extinguish Polish identity by such measures as forced conversion to Russian Orthodoxy. After a brief period of Polish independence between 1918 and 1939, the Soviet Union occupied Poland towards the end of World War II and imposed a Soviet-style communist government integrated into the Warsaw Pact. Since the demise of the Warsaw Pact in 1989, Poland has focused on maintaining its hard-won sovereignty while also keeping an eye on the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad on the northern border.

Germany, on the other hand, has emerged from its history of aggression between 1871 and 1945 reluctant to develop or deploy hard power and has tried to partner with Russia, perceived by many Germans as an inevitable strategic economic partner. Although West Germany was fully armed throughout the Cold War when it was a front-line state divided by the victors of World War II, today Poland is the front-line state, which diminishes German perceptions of the Russia threat. German politicians are not unanimous in perceiving Russia as a strategic threat, some still viewing it as an economic partner; this despite that Russia has not hesitated to use hard power on German territory, as



Political Map of the Baltic Sea. Image by: Nations Online Project

with the August 2019 assassination of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin. Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014, but particularly since its 2022 invasion has forced a reckoning in Germany which has not yet played out. On 27 February

2022, German Chancellor Olaf Sholtz spoke of "Zeitenwende" (literally "times-turn").⁸ He was unequivocal announcing "a one-off sum of €100 billion" for the Ministry of Defence and promising to invest more than two percent of gross domestic

product for German defense and to provide weapons to Ukraine. He even called for making two percent for defence part of the Basic Law, the German constitution. Political reality, however, takes its toll; due to factional dissent within the Social Democratic Party Germany has not fully funded its defense promises and has balked at providing some arms and munitions to the Ukrainians. Indeed, according to mid-2022 NATO estimates German defense expenditures will reach only 1.44 percent of GDP.⁹ This internal friction will prevent Germany from fully supporting Ukraine for the foreseeable future.

Denmark was also a frontline state during the Cold War and allied itself closely with NATO and the United States; this alignment still serves as the cornerstone of Danish security and defense policy. As a maritime nation with a North Sea coast and territory in the north Atlantic, Denmark emphasizes links to the UK and United States.

Baltic Sea Shield

Putin and his regime appear intent upon recapturing regional hegemony with the former Soviet Republics subordinate to Russia and enclosed within a sphere of influence that includes much of eastern Europe. Although Russia has avoided behavior that would justify a NATO military response, it constantly wages political warfare against Western states with operations in the information- and cyber-spaces in particular as well as the weaponization of energy resources and of refugees, all intended to destabilize the West. The nine Western-aligned states of the region are faced with such Russian political warfare daily.

With its military setbacks in Ukraine and the overall degradation of its military Russia can be expected to continue waging political warfare against Europe and North America into the indefinite future. It will continue to use all the elements of national power to weaken both national and international organizations, particularly using

influence campaigns, often facilitated through cyber operations.

Prior to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine there was significant diversity in national threat perceptions within the region. Those states farther east, particularly those that had been occupied by the Russian Empire and/or the Soviet Union, were singularly focused on Russia as an existential strategic threat, while those farther west tended toward an attitude balanced between Russia as threat, opportunity, or even potential partner.

Although all these states are targets of Russian political warfare, those in closer proximity to Russia unsurprisingly focus more intensely on Russia. The Baltic states and Poland focus entirely on the Russia threat (which they see as existential). Finland focuses on Russia but does not presently see the threat as existential. Germany sees Russia more as a challenge than a threat, and Denmark and Norway both understand that Russia is a threat to both the EU and NATO and therefore one of several challenges for Copenhagen and Oslo. These differences in perspectives complicate issues for the organizations that these states belong to. Because both the EU and NATO tend to work on a basis of unanimity, both can be blocked from action if any member dissents from an agreement. Although decisions based on unanimity can be very powerful, getting to a decision can be quite difficult, and decisions on Russia policy have been particularly difficult. While Europeans responded robustly to Russia's aggression in the Don River Basin, the annexation of Crimea, and the attempted assassination of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, neither the EU nor NATO are unanimous in their attitudes toward Russian information operations (particularly interference in the democratic process) and cyber operations. This is changing based on the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, however Europeans remain divided.

The security of the Baltic Sea region ultimately

depends on the strategies, approaches, and national security elements of the nine Baltic Sea regional states. NATO alone is not enough. They have each adopted distinct approaches to combating Russian gray zone aggression and political warfare. Each state in the region has undertaken significant reforms and strategic initiatives in response to the recently revived existential threat posed by revanchist Russia. None any longer wishes to be seen as a free-rider hiding behind U.S. power, and a sense of national and regional strategic autonomy has emerged. The reforms and initiatives of the individual states are critical. Yet there is still keen awareness of the strength in numbers and the power of confederacy. The Baltic states banded together to gain support through international frameworks and organizations (focusing on the EU and NATO). They work with their neighbors and they seek to influence larger partners (e.g., the U.S. and NATO) to achieve security. Their divergent interests and perspectives will need to find the most appropriate multilateral form to achieve policy goals: sometimes as NORDEFCO, the Baltic Three, as part of the Visegrad Four, and sometimes not.

Through their individual and collective efforts and initiatives the countries of the Baltic Sea region have created a robust Baltic Sea shield against Russian aggression. They have jointly strengthened Europe's northern flank; and while this Baltic Sea shield is not an iron-clad guarantee against Russian aggression, these efforts have substantially changed the strategic calculus vastly increasing the predictable cost to Russia of any incursion. The collective effort is well worthy of close examination and possible emulation in other regions vulnerable to autocratic aggression. The Baltic Sea region is an important example of states that are committed to working together and cooperating in order to protect their commonly accepted democratic freedoms, values, and "way of life." **PRISM**

Notes

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⁶ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, chapter VII, June 26, 1945, available at <<https://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/>>.

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⁸ Olaf Scholz, "Resolutely Committed to Peace and Security," policy statement, Berlin, February 27, 2022, available at <<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>>.

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