



A US Strategy for Advancing EU Enlargement

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A US Strategy for Advancing EU Enlargement

In 2014, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker famously declared a pause in the European Union's enlargement.¹ This pause is now over, after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine spurred the bloc to fill geopolitical vacuums along its periphery. Abandoning former strategic ambiguity toward its Eastern neighborhood, the European Union has opened accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and granted candidacy to Georgia.² EU enlargement's new momentum has spilled over into the Western Balkans, where Bosnia-Herzegovina has likewise received the green light for negotiations and North Macedonia and Albania have formally begun them.³

There are currently ten officially recognized or potential candidates for EU membership (adding Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Türkiye to the above six). While their current progress toward joining the bloc ranges widely, all have nonetheless received an explicit promise of membership from the European Union. Yet daunting obstacles to enlargement remain. Both the European Union and accession countries must make difficult reforms. Unresolved conflicts in accession countries—most crucially the war in Ukraine—continue to block their EU paths, and these countries' persistent economic and security vulnerabilities make progress along this path fragile.

The United States can make a difference in overcoming these obstacles. Successful EU enlargement will serve numerous enduring US interests by promoting stability, prosperity, and democracy in Europe, a key strategic region for the United States. It would also strengthen the European Union as Washington's partner of first resort in addressing rising challenges from Russia, China, and

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their deepening cooperation with Iran and North Korea. The Trump administration should therefore deploy all the tools at its disposal for doing so—taking advantage of enlargement’s current momentum to strike while the iron is hot.

The US Interest in EU Enlargement

As President Donald Trump’s second term kicks off, his administration has yet to lay out a clear position on the issue of EU enlargement. During his first term, EU enlargement was largely off the agenda, having only been reinvigorated following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. With a window of opportunity to make a real difference on this issue during Trump’s second term, the new administration has numerous reasons to adopt a pro-enlargement stance.

The United States has long considered Europe a region of core interest that is indivisible from its own security and prosperity, as evidenced by its seventy-five years of commitment to NATO. While Trump has consistently urged NATO allies to contribute more to their own defense, he is likely to retain this commitment to the alliance as long as it achieves more equitable burden-sharing.⁴ This reflects the reality that while the Indo-Pacific may increasingly be the focus of US foreign policy, stability in Europe nonetheless continues to hold high importance for Washington.

Alongside NATO, the European Union has been crucial in stabilizing the European continent. Originating as a peace project, its progressive enlargement has likewise expanded the zone of stability in Europe—the European Union now encompasses 450 million people across twenty-seven member states. A continent once plagued by war now boasts the world’s closest interstate cooperation, coming closer than ever to the US objective of a Europe whole, free, and at peace. Further enlargement will help stabilize Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans—the two missing pieces in this vision, and two regions where the United States has invested

Integration of Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans into the EU can help the US and Europe

significant time and energy since the end of the Cold War. As the Trump administration looks to shift resources away from Europe in the years to come, integration of these two regions into the European Union can help reduce the need for Washington to continue playing a leading role in ensuring stability there.

The EU integration of Eastern Europe’s gray zone along Russia’s periphery is crucial to countering Vladimir Putin’s project to reshape the regional order and undermine

Western influence. The first Trump administration put a notable emphasis on successfully navigating a renewed era of great power competition, which has

only heightened since then. While it remains unclear how Trump's foreign policy team will handle likely negotiations on a settlement to the war in Ukraine, supporting EU membership can help thread the needle between, on one hand, satisfying Kyiv's desire for post-war integration into the West while checking Putin's ambitions to make Ukraine a Russian vassal, and on the other hand, the new US administration's reluctance to advance Ukrainian NATO membership. Bringing Moldova—and perhaps also Georgia and Armenia in the longer term—into the European Union would also counter Russia's efforts to prevail in its perceived war with the West.

In the Western Balkans, the main security risks are internal. A quarter century after the United States helped end interethnic violence in the region and pave the way for granting an EU perspective, tensions continue to simmer. In the Western Balkans, the promise of EU membership helps to unite the region's multiethnic societies, and a failure to fulfill this promise could exacerbate residual tensions. Needing to expend more resources on Balkan conflict resolution would distract Washington from larger challenges, including the Trump administration's stated intention of focusing on countering China.⁵ Identifying fertile ground to sow chaos, Beijing and Moscow are actively attempting to destabilize the region, fueling disillusionment with the slow pace of EU integration.⁶ Advancing enlargement to the Western Balkans will therefore allow the United States to both push back against its great power adversaries and reduce its need to maintain a long-term presence in the region.

Much of the European Union's stabilizing influence derives from its power to promote domestic transformation in accession countries. Like in the present day, previous rounds of enlargement had geopolitical roots, as wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s motivated the European Union to integrate the fragile, newly independent states of Central and Eastern Europe. These countries have since rapidly evolved into thriving free market democracies, avoiding the fate of becoming a zone of instability in Europe. Thus, while the Trump administration may have limited interest in democracy promotion as an end in itself, it should recognize the contribution of democratic consolidation—including through the EU accession process—to the larger goal of European stability and security, freeing the United States to focus elsewhere.

To gain EU membership, countries must possess stable democratic institutions that are based on the rule of law and that guarantee human rights and protections for minorities.⁷ Although the European Union's limited ability to address backsliding among current members is problematic, its record on incentivizing reforms before accession is much more positive. The need to transform their political systems for EU membership has accelerated democratic development in previously unfree European countries, including former dictatorships in Southern Europe and former communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.

Between 1993, when the European Union first promised membership to Central and Eastern European countries, and 2003, on the eve of their EU accession, seven of the eight initial post-communist accession countries improved their civil liberties and/or political rights scores from Freedom House. Ensuring the continued credibility of future EU membership in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans can likewise help democratize accession countries in these regions, all of which currently only rank as partly free according to Freedom House.⁸

EU enlargement also catalyzes economic growth. Membership in the bloc increases prosperity through integration into a single market encompassing 450 million consumers with high incomes by global standards, alignment with an effective regulatory regime that promotes investor confidence, and access to large sums of EU funds. Since 2007, the International Monetary Fund has granted advanced economy status to seven formerly communist EU member states—the world’s only non-micro-states to attain this during that period.⁹ Other new EU members not yet in this category have nonetheless grown at breakneck rates—Poland, for instance, has nearly tripled its GDP since joining the bloc.¹⁰ These gains are significant not only in absolute terms but also relative to older EU member states, leading to economic convergence within the bloc.¹¹ While this convergence does entail tradeoffs for older member states who tend to foot the bill for the EU funds earmarked for new members, the expansion of intra-EU trade and investment opportunities that come with an enlarged single market offset a good deal of this cost. The overall long-term result of EU enlargement is a more prosperous Europe.

Moreover, a more prosperous Europe means a more prosperous United States. As Europe receives the majority of US global investment and accounts for the plurality of US trade in goods and services, a significant portion of US economic vitality depends on the transatlantic link.¹²

Supporting EU enlargement can yield direct economic gains for the US and its companies

Supporting EU enlargement can therefore yield direct economic gains for the United States and its companies, which profit from increased trade and investment opportunities in new member states as well as the overall economic dynamism spurred by the single market’s expansion. This argument may be particularly compelling to the Trump administration, given the current US president’s notable focus on securing economic benefits

for the United States from the transatlantic relationship. This appeal has already been evident in discussions about a potential deal that would facilitate US investment in Ukraine’s critical minerals sector in exchange for continued

support. Moreover, the postwar reconstruction of Ukraine will benefit greatly from the country's integration into the European Union, with EU funding schemes associated with membership representing an enormous opportunity for economic transformation. This would accordingly reduce the economic burden of Ukrainian reconstruction for the United States.

Finally, successful enlargement would empower the EU-US partnership, enhancing the European Union's value as a force multiplier for US global influence. The European Union's past enlargements have already increased its geopolitical role, transforming it into a great power on a continental scale with an economy rivaling those of the United States and China. Not only would the addition of accession countries enlarge the European Union's territory, population, and economy, but the integration of Ukraine in particular would considerably strengthen the EU defense industrial base. A commitment by EU member states to link their economies to Ukraine's would also demonstrate to the United States their seriousness in shouldering the long-term challenge of deterring Russia, freeing up Washington to devote more resources to the Indo-Pacific. Thus, while Trump has not previously placed a high priority on engaging directly with Brussels versus individual member states, enlargement may enhance the value of the US-EU partnership in the eyes of his administration. With burden-shifting at the top of Trump's list of priorities for transatlantic relations, a more prominent geopolitical role for the European Union could be a major advantage.

In the wake of the landmark decisions on enlargement at the December 2023 European Council summit—opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, granting candidate status to Georgia, and conditionally opening accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina—the Biden administration vowed its continued support for EU enlargement.¹³ The road to admitting new member states into the European Union, however, is long and difficult, requiring that US support endures into the second Trump administration. Explicit recognition of the many US interests tied up in the enlargement process that transcend partisan divides can help to ensure this support.

US Support for EU Enlargement

While enlargement can yield immense benefits, realizing these benefits requires surmounting numerous obstacles—both within accession countries and within the European Union itself. Active US engagement can help to address these challenges. Notably, much of this engagement may come from the working levels of government, reducing the need for President

Active US engagement at the working levels can help address EU enlargement challenges

Trump himself to take an avid interest in the issue of EU enlargement—admittedly an uncertain prospect, despite the numerous US interests in the process.

Leveraging Technical and Diplomatic Tools

Among the ten official or unofficial candidates for accession, movement toward EU integration has been far from uniform. This wide range of progress reflects varied preparedness for meeting the Copenhagen Criteria: stable democratic institutions, a market economy, and adoption of EU law.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the Commission has made clear that all countries have remaining work to do in reaching these goals. Certain countries also have unique challenges to address—Ukraine, for instance, will need to mitigate the distorting effects of wartime mobilization on its legal, political, and economic systems.

To spur reform, the United States should provide in-depth technical support, including by dispatching experts that can advise accession countries on how to implement administrative changes. Washington could also encourage progress by aligning its own conditions for economic and security assistance with EU accession conditions. This is already the case for Ukraine, where the United States has linked financial support to certain priority reforms necessary for Kyiv's EU integration.¹⁵ Intensified dialogue between the State Department and the Commission's Directorate General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations could be particularly helpful here.

These steps may be more effective in some countries than others, depending on the government. Leaders in Ukraine, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania largely continue to demonstrate willingness for reform.¹⁶ Conversely, commitment from governments in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo appears weaker, even if none are yet lost causes.¹⁷ The most difficult cases are Georgia and Türkiye, where accession talks have been frozen since 2024 and 2018 respectively, and whose current leaders have shown little recent interest in EU accession.¹⁸

To increase pressure on recalcitrant governments, Washington could threaten additional sanctions on officials that obstruct their countries' EU path. The US government has already taken steps in this direction, including its 2021 authorization of sanctions against individuals destabilizing the Western Balkans (later expanded in early 2025) and its 2024 sanctions on Georgian politicians undermining democracy and the country's EU path.¹⁹ It should build on them by clearly expressing its intention—coordinated with the European Union—to intensify sanctions if these governments continue backsliding. Congress could help deliver this message by sending delegations to these backsliding accession countries.

Finally, Washington could advance reform by expanding public diplomacy and civil society engagement in accession countries. The United States worked to

amplify the voices of local populations ahead of past enlargements, for instance by helping to establish numerous non-governmental organizations in post-Soviet states, and it should replicate this effort now.²⁰ This is especially important in countries such as Georgia with pro-EU popular sentiment but a backsliding government.²¹ Conversely, in countries such as Serbia where EU accession is less popular, boosting pro-EU sentiment among the population could increase pressure on the government from below.²²

Ensuring the Integrity of the Accession Process

Deep and sustainable reform is more likely if accession countries have no other route to EU membership. Maintaining the integrity of the accession process is critical given the negative long-term consequences of admitting countries prematurely and the fact that the European Union's power to affect domestic change in a candidate country is greatest prior to accession. The case of Hungary illustrates this point. After Hungary gained EU membership in 2004 despite persistent flaws in its democracy, Brussels has been largely unable to prevent its rule of law violations.²³ Budapest's undemocratic government has also acted as a trojan horse for Russian and Chinese interests, undermining the European Union's effectiveness as a partner for the United States.

The European Union has already made the accession process more stringent since previous rounds of enlargement, including by instituting rule of law reports for candidates.²⁴ Nonetheless, ensuring its integrity requires resisting inevitable appeals for expedited membership by accession countries, as has also occurred before previous enlargements.²⁵ This is particularly crucial given that Freedom House currently considers no accession country to be fully free.²⁶ The United States should therefore avoid fueling hopes of fast-track accession and urge EU leaders to do the same.

Ensuring a Sustainable Peace in Ukraine

The ongoing war in Ukraine is the elephant in the room for EU enlargement. It is impossible to clearly envision Ukraine's future EU membership as long as the conflict's outcome remains uncertain. Yet regardless of how much territory Kyiv controls, a sustainable peace within that territory is a prerequisite for full EU membership, given the bloc's mutual defense clause in Article 42(7) of the Lisbon Treaty.²⁷ As long as fighting continues, admitting Ukraine would likely obligate other EU member states to intervene directly in the war—a virtual nonstarter.

To achieve a lasting armistice, there must be credible deterrence against potential Russian attacks on Ukrainian-controlled soil. The most effective means of establishing deterrence would likely be NATO membership.

However, given its reluctance to pursue this route, the Trump administration should work with European partners to forge an alternative security arrangement. In recent months, there has been increasing discussion of a potential European military presence in Ukraine that could secure a ceasefire by serving as a tripwire force in the absence of NATO membership. France and the United Kingdom, which have the two most capable European militaries, have been leading the development of this idea, and other countries have been involved in discussions about it as well.²⁸ Importantly, President Trump has expressed support for the idea.²⁹ There may also be a higher chance that Vladimir Putin would agree to such an arrangement than to Ukrainian NATO membership in likely upcoming ceasefire negotiations. Still, many details remain unresolved, including where and how many European forces would be deployed as well as the types of capabilities they would possess. Going forward, the Trump administration should help develop these still largely speculative proposals into a concrete plan.

Establishing deterrence through European boots on the ground, in addition to paving the way for EU membership, would also likely require a credible path to EU membership as a complement to satisfy the Ukrainians. A key reason for Kyiv's war effort has been its desire to determine its own future as a member of the Euro-Atlantic community. If NATO membership is off the table for the time being, making progress toward EU integration will be even more important to Ukraine.

Reconstructing Ukraine

Ukraine will also need to rebuild its economy before it can achieve full EU membership, given the Copenhagen criteria's emphasis on having the ability to withstand internal competition arising from integration into the single market.³⁰ Achieving sufficient prosperity to meet this condition after a devastating war will require large scale support from Ukraine's Western backers. There has been a tacit understanding that the European Union would lead Ukraine's reconstruction, and the bloc has already begun doing this, including by establishing a Ukraine Facility for long-term financial assistance.³¹ However, significant US support will nonetheless be necessary to help cover the estimated \$486 billion cost of recovery—just as European support has been a necessary complement to US leadership in Ukraine's war effort.³²

Washington is already working closely with Brussels and Kyiv to secure financing for Ukraine's future economic needs. The United States is a co-chair of the steering committee for the Multi-Agency Donor Coordination Platform for Ukraine, and it has also been a key participant in the series of Ukraine Recovery Conferences, announcing major new funding for reconstruction following the June 2023 London conference.³³ However, the United States could do more in this arena.

Given likely constraints on direct budget support, Washington should focus on incentivizing more private sector investment in Ukraine, for instance by offering subsidized political risk insurance—the lack of which has proven a major hurdle since 2022.³⁴ The US International Development Finance Corporation could play a role in providing this insurance. The United States could also provide additional seed capital through either the existing Ukraine Development Fund, an independent development finance institution sponsored by the Ukrainian government, or alternatively a potential international private investment fund proposed by Germany.³⁵ Washington can also increase investor confidence by doubling down on anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine as well as pushing forward the plan for a European-enforced ceasefire, which will likely increase investors' willingness to channel resources into the country.³⁶ Finally, Washington should plug in more closely to ongoing EU infrastructure development efforts in accession countries, exploring synergies between the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and the EU Global Gateway.³⁷ These investments will foster long-term transport, energy, and digital connectivity critical to economic integration with the European Union—as well as reduce dependence on US competitors such as Russia and China.

Washington can focus on incentivizing more private sector investment to help rebuild Ukraine

Solving the Kosovo Conundrum

Ukraine is not the only accession country to pose unique challenges. In the Western Balkans, Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo and Kosovo's failure to provide autonomy to ethnic Serbs continue to block both those countries' EU accession. Belgrade's accession protocol explicitly conditions its membership on normalization of relations, while Pristina is unlikely to receive candidacy without normalization.³⁸ The United States has a key role to play in resolving this dispute. Washington's historical involvement in the Balkans and global pre-eminence provide it with diplomatic clout that the European Union sometimes lacks due to its weak track record in the region and the non-recognition of Kosovo by five EU member states.

Though the United States has been supporting the EU-mediated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, it can do more. Washington can incentivize normalization by making it a condition for funding to Serbia and Kosovo, while threatening sanctions if they refuse dialogue. Kosovo's EU accession also requires other non-recognizers to reverse their positions, including the five current EU

members and four EU candidates besides Serbia.³⁹ Washington could encourage this by appointing a Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition and fostering economic ties between Kosovo and the non-recognizers. First tackling lower hanging fruit such as Slovakia and Greece, which take more constructive approaches to Kosovo, could build momentum toward a domino effect extending to other non-recognizers, perhaps even including Serbia.

Thawing Frozen Conflicts in Eastern Europe

Similarly, unresolved territorial disputes in Georgia and Moldova pose a major obstacle to their EU membership. Although it is possible to admit a country without full territorial control, the case of Cyprus—which since joining the European Union in 2004 has made little headway on reunification—demonstrates the folly in doing so, as it eliminates leverage in resolving a conflict and leaves a perpetual source of instability along the bloc's borders.⁴⁰ While Georgia's reintegration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia seems unlikely in the near term, evolving dynamics present an opportunity for Moldova to reintegrate Transnistria with US assistance.

The Ukraine war has cut off Transnistria's access to Russia, increasing its dependence on Moldova and the European Union, which now accounts for 80 percent of Transnistrian exports.⁴¹ Moldova has started increasing pressure on Transnistria, outlawing separatism and collecting additional customs duties.⁴² Despite Transnistria's calls for Russian protection, Moscow has limited ability to influence events, given the insignificant military value of its troop presence in Transnistria.⁴³ Moldova is extending olive branches as well as sticks to Transnistria, offering expedited paths to Moldovan citizenship and free Romanian language classes to its citizens.⁴⁴

Thus, though Transnistria has not yet expressed openness to reintegration, this could change if current trends hold. The United States should aim to expedite the process. One potential opportunity is to take advantage of likely ill will toward Russia following its January 2025 gas supply cutoff to Transnistria. With the region's leadership now signaling its willingness to instead source gas from Moldova proper, Washington can support this reduction of Russian influence over Transnistria by helping to subsidize this energy and make it more affordable to citizens.⁴⁵ If Transnistria does return to Russian gas, the United States should discourage Moldova from resuming its own imports of this gas, which Moldovan officials assess could unleash sufficient economic damage to topple the pro-Russian regime in Transnistria.⁴⁶ Washington could step in by promising to support Transnistrians, mitigating the chances of ending up with an alienated, subversive Transnistria within a reunified Moldova.

Providing Security Assistance to Other Accession Countries

Though only Ukraine is actively at war, other accession countries face serious security risks. Renewed fighting in the Western Balkans remains a possibility, and Moldova remains vulnerable to potential Russian aggression. As is currently the case for Ukraine, kinetic conflict would put an indefinite brake on any of these countries' paths to EU accession. To bolster deterrence in the Western Balkans, the United States should continue joint exercises with the Bosnian military, maintain its recently strengthened presence in NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission, and temporarily reinforce the EUFOR mission in Bosnia while urging the European Union to beef up its presence there for the future.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the United States should strengthen its bilateral defense partnership with Moldova, for instance by providing air defense systems.

Renewed fighting in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe remain possibilities

It is also urgent to counter hybrid threats, recent examples of which include Russia's financing of counter-government protests in Moldova, fueling the antidemocratic agenda of the government in Georgia, and disinformation campaigns in various accession countries.⁴⁸ While these threats are often difficult to prevent, building societal resilience can help to blunt their effects. To do so, the United States could invest in counter-disinformation educational programs and encourage anticorruption reforms in accession countries.

Success in countering hybrid threats could help to reduce Russian and Chinese influence in certain accession countries—most notably Serbia and Georgia—that continue to resist alignment with EU foreign policy, a key roadblock on their paths to membership. In addition to refusing to implement sanctions against Moscow, both Serbia and Georgia have cozied up to Beijing in recent years, while the European Union has moved toward a more competitive relationship with China. Achieving this foreign policy alignment is more crucial now than ever before, given the increasingly geopolitical nature of enlargement.

Encouraging EU Reform

Finally, EU member states currently agree on the general need for reforms to accompany enlargement, as evidenced by the European Council's December 2023 statement that explicitly linked further enlargement to internal reform.⁴⁹ This follows directly from the Copenhagen accession criteria, which notably include the European Union's ability to effectively cope with the absorption of additional members.⁵⁰

Yet EU member states continue to disagree on the scope and manner of reforms. Consensus is lacking on how to address various concerns about the feasibility of enlargement, including ineffective decision-making, an inadequate budgetary setup, and flaws in the enlargement methodology. Failure to solve these issues will likely stop enlargement in its tracks.

Reconciling divergent member state visions for reform will require strong leadership from the Commission. It has played this role before, having prepared and brokered agreement on a strategic reform plan preceding the 2004 Big Bang enlargement that added ten new countries to the bloc.⁵¹ While the Commission's existing reform proposals for this round of enlargement are a good start, follow-through is critical. Significant delay of a concrete reform roadmap would run the risk of momentum fading in the face of competing priorities. This would also send a bad signal to accession countries, which would interpret the delay as a lack of commitment to enlargement.

While the particular course of reform is an EU decision, US diplomatic efforts could help sustain momentum, especially given Washington's leading role within

**US diplomatic
efforts could help
sustain momentum
on EU reform**

NATO and in supporting Ukraine. The United States should encourage the Commission to prioritize the reform agenda and likewise express support for timely reform in its bilateral engagement with EU member states, many of whom are often receptive to Washington's priorities given their desire to maintain a strong American security guaran-

tee. In doing so, however, the United States must be clear about its motivations. Washington has long pushed the European Union to change its internal rules and functioning. Unfortunately, this has sometimes included heavy-handed efforts to pressure the European Union to act against its own interests, such as an unsuccessful campaign during the first Trump administration to allow US companies to access EU defense industrial funds.⁵² The European Union is likely to be much more amenable to US efforts that instead seek to strengthen it as a partner—something that tackling these needed reforms would accomplish.

Enlarging for the Future

The obstacles to EU enlargement, while daunting, are surmountable. A decade before their accession in 2004, formerly communist Central and Eastern European countries seemed unprepared for EU membership, and many doubted their prospects of joining.⁵³ Many also feared then that the European Union could not absorb new members without succumbing to dysfunction.⁵⁴ Yet in

the end, both candidate countries and the European Union itself largely did what was necessary for enlargement to work. Both Europe and the United States are far better off today as a result.

Today, as in the years before the 2004 enlargement, geopolitical concerns are front and center. It is encouraging that EU leaders recognize these stakes. Yet *wanting* to enlarge is not the same as *doing* so. Without an ambitious yet clearly achievable strategy, enlargement may very well fail—causing immense damage to European security, prosperity, and democracy, as well as to the future of the European Union as a credible and effective actor. Given US economic, political, and security interests in averting such an outcome, Washington should have a central role in this strategy.

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