

Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in West Africa: Implication for Nigerian Security

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Abstract

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in West Africa poses significant threats to regional and national security particularly Nigeria. This paper attempts to assess the implication Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in West African Sub-region on Nigerian Security. To achieve this, the paper employed content analysis to x-ray the existing literatures on the central theme of the paper. The paper found that, West African sub-region is now awash with Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) of the approximately 500 million illicit weapons in circulation worldwide. This unfortunate situation is intricately connected with the strategic location of the West-African Sub-Region at the seaboard of Atlantic Ocean. The paper also found that SALW proliferation in West Africa fueled insurgency, banditry, kidnapping for ransoms, farmers-herders' conflicts, electoral violence, etc. in Nigeria, thereby exacerbating humanitarian crises and undermining the state authority. The paper concludes that it would be meaningless to talk of comprehensive security in Nigeria in the midst of absence of good governance and pervasive leadership crises demonstrated in the form of absence of political will and commitment by our political actors to consciously implement programmes and policies that would promote socio-economic well-being of the country and also to embrace vital aspects of social and national development, such as the provision of employment opportunities and other basic social amenities that are vital for satisfying individuals' basic needs.

Keywords: Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation, Security. West Africa

Introduction

It is unarguable that protection of the citizenry from any internal and external threat including other forms of danger emerges as a central source of legitimacy for the State and State action in general. This perhaps may not be unconnected with the fact that the State is an established institution responsible for the provision of welfare services to its people. Strengthening this position, Gauba (2003) posits that State came into existence for the sake of good life and it continues in being just for that sake. Suffice to note that, States exist to serve the interest of all individuals or all sections of the society. In other words, the essence of the state is the promotion of good life and creation of conditions within the State that would enhance the welfare of the citizenry.

Buttressing the above submission, Misillegas, Monar, and Rees (2003) observed that "providing internal security for citizens is among the essential public goods any state has to deliver and ranks high among its primary sources of legitimacy". Implied from this observation is the fact that the state exists in order to guarantee the security of its inhabitants, their persons and their property. This view found its classic expression in John Locke's 'Second Treatise of Government', which places greater emphasis on the rule of law in ensuring the individual's security (Misillegas, Monar, and Rees, 2003).

From the above submissions, therefore, it is clear that, state came into existence for the sake of safeguarding lives, property, welfare of citizens against both internal and external threats including other forms of dangers and it has also showed that legitimacy of the state is dependent on ensuring a secure and safe environment for its citizens.

But, surprisingly, in spite above the authoritative submissions, an atmosphere of insecurity has enveloped the sub-region. For instance, the Boko Haram crisis, the Niger Delta Militancy, post-election violence, inter and intra party conflicts, Armed Robbery, Ethnic and religious clashes, youth's violence etc. have enveloped the West African Sub-region leading to wanton loss of lives and property and displacement of hundreds and thousands innocent citizens. This unfortunate situation is not unconnected with level of proliferation of small arms and light weapons and aided the manifestation of armed conflicts, insurgency, terrorism, militancy, assassination, ethno-religious conflicts to mention but few. This because, it is evidently clear that, as rightly pointed out by Abdullahi (2010:147) that, The growth and the widespread cases of Small and Light Arms Proliferation in the West-African Sub-Region are aided by the strategic location of the West-African Sub-Region at the seaboard of Atlantic Ocean.

The Concept of Security

In conceptualizing security, two broad perspectives have been identified by security analysts: First, is what called the "traditional perspective or conventional approach" in which Security is perceived as the state of military preparedness to defend a country against external threats; and secondly, is what called the "broader perspective or alternative approach" which encompasses political, economic, social and environmental security which impact on the quality of life or wellbeing of the people in addition to state or military preparedness.

Thus, Security is conceived to mean, "Freedom from danger, or with threats to nation's ability to protect and develop itself, promote its cherished values and legitimate interest and enhance the well-being of its people" (Mijah; 2007). Seen from this broader perspective, security imply the maturation of the structures and process that can engender and guarantee political, economic, social space and sufficient conditions for the realization of personal, group and national goals (Imobighe, 1990) .

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Proliferation in West Africa: An Overview

Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation is the illicit act of importing, exporting, acquisition sale delivery and movement or transfer of firearms or their parts and components and ammunitions from or across the territory of one state to another without the authorization or in violation of legislation or regulations of state security laws (Onuoha. 2011). This illicit movement of weapons and in particular Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has been prevalent and widespread within the West African sub-region. There are number of factors that have contributed to the growth, development and proliferation of SAWL in the sub-region, the most important is the lingering and the prevalence of conflicts in the West African sub-region.

Small arms and light weapons proliferations have serious devastating consequences to the security and stability not only in the West African Sub Region but rather the world over. West African Sub Region remains an area of significant arms proliferation because of their affordability, accessibility availability obtainability and porosity of borders and legal frameworks legitimize their use (Kelli, 2008 and Kwaja, Kwaja, 2012). West Africa hosts about

7 to 10 million of the world's illegal SALW as well as 8 million out of the 100 million circulating in Africa (Edeko, 2011 and Kwaja 2012). Additionally 77,000 of the small arms are purportedly within the control of West African Insurgents (Ebo & Mazal, 2003).

The spread of illegal arms within and across the West African Sub Region have upsurge the tendency of conflict within the sub-region. Small arms proliferation has funded the mobilization for coups d'état, undemocratic toppled of government, upsurge of casualties and violent inter-communal and intra-state conflict in the West Africa (Ero & Ndinga-Muvumba 2004). Since 1960 there have been over 37 successful coup d'état in almost all the West African Countries often resulting in violent wars, massacre million and relocating many (Keili, 2008 & Kwaja, 2012). Furthermore, small arms proliferation notably fired the conflict in in Liberia, Sierra Leone, cote d'voire, Guinea Bissau, Mali Niger Senegal and Togo (Keili, 2008 and Kwaja, 2012)

There are broadly three types of arms proliferation processes in West Africa sub-region and they include;

- i. The first type carry out the ill-fated business via small scale transaction by individuals or small firms that consciously break the law of a state by illegally transferring arms to illicit recipients or by displaced people carrying gun for protection. This is the type of the arm proliferation that is particularly prevalent in countries with a major conflict in the area. The arms traded in most cases fall into the hands of criminals and non-state actors. This has been in countries such as Kenya, Republic of Niger and Nigeria as well. This is because the countries have surrounded with war turn areas with a number of refugee camps along their borders. For instances, numbers of refugees coming into their countries from Sudan and Somalia (Kwaja, 2012).
- ii. The second category of arms proliferation in West African sub-region consists of higher value or more difficult illicit shipment of arms that often involve corrupt officials brokers or middle-men motivated mainly by profit. These often use well-established networks and channels, also employed for smuggling other illicit goods. It is this form of proliferation that was partially instrumental in the arming of Hutu and Tutsi warring factions during the Rwanda Genocide (Onuoha, 2011)
- iii. The third type of proliferation sees the involvement of governments. Government or at list its agencies involve to the large possible extent in the arms trafficking. Not only that they often turn a blind eye to the two types of trafficking outlined above. They also deliberately facilitate hidden flows of arms to their proxies or allies. This type of arms proliferation notably fuelled the conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo (Keili 2008 and Kwaja, 2012). For example, arms were supplied by governments to aid the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire (Kwaja, 2012). For instance, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) was accused of supplying and distributing FodaySankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) with arms to fuel the conflict in Sierra Leone. The conflict led to the death of over 50,000 people; 30,000 amputations; and the sexual violation of over 257,000 women (Ploughshares2002). Additionally, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group received weapons from the Guinean governments which they used to kill civilians in Monrovia during the conflict in Liberia (Keili 2008 and Kwaja, 2012).

Factors Responsible for Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in West African Sub Region:

West African Geopolitics: Broadly speaking, West African Sub-Region lies between the Gulf of Guinea in the south and the southern edge of Sahara Desert in the north (Although, three West African Countries extend well into the Sahara). In the West the region is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean (Onuoha, 2011). The region consist about 25 million inhabitants that are spread over five million square kilometers. The sub-region is almost a third of the whole African and it composed of sixteen countries that were subjects of intense competition among Europeans colonial powers (Abdullahi, 2010:146). In recent years West Africa produced over half of cocoa crop with Ghana alone accounting for almost one-quarter of the world production. The other major producers are Nigeria and Ivory Coast with small quantity coming from Togo and Sierra Leone. In 1970s West Africa accounted 17% of world export trade for groundnut 49% of that groundnut oil production (Senior and Okunrotifa, 1991) these endowment in the sub-region resulted to intense resources competition among the ethnic group in the sub-region. The situation also provide a ground for movement of small and light arms in the sub-region which can easily get into Nigeria because of its porous border which in turn nurse and fuel the growth and the development of insurgency, militancy and communal clashes As Abdullahi (2010:146) further argues that,

It is the source of billions barrels worth of oil. The arc from the Ivory Coast in the north western of South Africa in the south contains proven deposits, mostly offshore oil amounting to 20-30 billion barrels. It is well endowed with enormous natural resources which has made it vulnerable to aggressive competition for those resources that now fuel conflicts in the sub-region

Furthermore, the location of the West African states particularly 13 out of 16 states of the sub region at shore of the Atlantic Ocean make the sub region the most strategic position for Africa and also exposed the area vulnerable to crises and the proliferation of small and light arms in the sub region. The location of the West African sub region provides a link between North Africa and the Western Europe and the rest of the third world (Abdullahi, 2010 and Senior and Okunrotifa, 1991).

The Civil Wars in the West African Sub-Region: The history of West Africa is a series of conflicts. Most of the states have been seen civil wars (Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea Bissau and Ivory Cast) military Coup d'états (Nigeria, Gambia, Niger, and Guinea) as well as ethnic clashes (Benin, Nigeria and Mali) since independence. These provide a gaining ground for growth and spread arms to Nigeria and other West African country. In fact one would right to posits that West African's civil wars are usually described as tragedies because of their capacity to spread beyond their national borders. For instance, the spotlight was in Liberia in 1990s, couple of years after Liberia the conflicts was in Cote d'voire which also received world attention. Before that also it was in Guinea and before that it was Sierra Leone also in fact one cannot understand the other without reference to another (Special Report, 2003) This seriously facilitate the growth and widespread of small and light arms in the sub region.

Socio-economic Crises in the West African Sub-Region: The socio-economic crises in the West African Sub-Region have brought many of its economies to the verge of collapse by creating humanitarian causalities and concern for decades. Countries such as Liberia, Sierra

Leone, Cote d'voire and Guinea Bissau were crippled by conflicts and civil strife in which violence and incessant massacres become order of the day (Anan, 2016). These conflicts are often hinged on several factors including poverty, human right violations, ethnic marginalization, and corruption. Consequently Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation (SALWP) in sub-region become order of the day which in turn has aided the proliferation of non-state actors such militants, terrorists to fight and survive the wars in the sub region for years. In other words, the socio-economic crises in the West African Sub-Region have abetted proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWP) in sub-region

Vicious Cycle of Poverty in West Africa Sub-Region

Poverty is the state of being extremely poor. It is a situation whereby the individual is not able to meet the basic necessity of life (Macaver and Maianguwa, 2003; Hallendendu and Madaki, 2003 Termande, 2003 and Abubakar 2003). Poverty also stands to be one of the major setbacks in West Africa and the continent of Africa. According to the 2012 UNDP Human Development report nearly half of sub-Saharan Africans live in poverty (UNDP, 2012). Consequently, many believed that the poverty across the continent is the major contributing factors to arms proliferation and the occurrence of violent conflicts in West Africa.

Like the rest of Africa, the West Africa sub-region is neither immune to the poverty menace nor ignorant of its impact on their fragile peace and stability. With over 60 per cent of its population living below the poverty line of US\$1 a day, civil unrest and grievances, both recipes for conflicts, become widespread. These agitations sometimes take violent forms and are seen as channels for punishing governments for their failure to alleviate poverty (ECOWAS, 2006).

Similar assertions have also been made with regards to the conflicts in Nigeria and Guinea-Bissau. Report, poverty was stated as one of the major cause of the Bissau-Guinean conflicts, causing food insecurity, lack of infrastructure and access to basic social needs as some of the poverty indicators in the country (Richard, 2003). Emphasizing the connection between poverty and conflict, the Bissau-Guineans have an proverb which states 'In homes where there is no bread winner everyone fights and no one is right' Indeed hunger, starvation, lack of economic growth and development create a high likelihood of violent conflicts and civil strife (Voz di Paz and Inter peace 2010).

Human Rights Violations in West Africa Sub-region

Incidences of human rights abuses and violations are numerous in West Africa and as such this forms the basis for the eruption and renewal of violent conflicts and civil strife in the sub-region. Across the sub-region, which at the tail end facilitate in the spread of light weapons in the sub region. There are reported incidences of sexual and gender-based violence, reprisal killings, eating, and impunity for state officials and institutions, high social injustice, repressive and brutal leadership, and unequal distribution of state resources among others (HRW, 2003). All these also possess the capacity of providing a gaining ground for arms proliferation in the West African sub-region.

For instance, in Nigeria, violations of the human rights of local citizens underscore as one of the factors causing the militancy in the Niger Delta region (Ejibunu 2007: 17). Many of the oil companies in the region are reported to be causing environmental pollution and economic marginalization while the state supinely looks on. A specific example is the 1992 killings of youth from Bonny, a local community, during a peaceful demonstration against the ecological

pollution and marginalization caused by Shell Company (Brisibe 2001 and Ejibunu 2007). Unfortunately, the state security institutions support these oil companies to violate the rights of its own citizens as was the case in January 1993 when 300,000 Ogoni protestors who were harassed, arrested and killed by Federal government troops when demonstrating peacefully against Shell oil for environmental pollution and economic marginalization (Ejibunu 2007: 17). In Guinea-Bissau as well, the impunity for human rights abuse by state officials in part led to the violent conflict that destabilized the country in 1998 (Voz di Paz and Inter peace 2010). Local authorities are often accused of engaging in beatings and oppression of the local citizens creating a culture of which bred major conflict with brutal consequences (Voz di Paz and Inter peace 2010).

Due to the continuous existence of these repressive acts against the citizens and among ethnic groups, even after the 1998 civil war, Guinea-Bissau seems to be sitting on a boiling pot of tensions which, unresolved, could explode into another violent conflict as was mildly witnessed in the 2010 mutiny and the recent April 2012 coup d'état (Zenoumenou and Okeke 2012). Moreover, human rights violations in seemingly stable West African countries such as The Gambia and Equatorial Guinea are increasingly creating precarious situations for instability. Although these countries have not experienced large-scale violent conflicts in recent times as their neighbours have, the brutal, undemocratic, unequal and authoritative rule by incumbent regimes is creating tensions which, unresolved, could bring the countries to a boiling point of violent war and civil strife. The 2011 Freedom House report on the 'Worst of the Worst: The World's Most Repressive Societies' named Equatorial Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire as part of the 20 most repressed societies in the world (Freedom House 2011). The Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo regime in Equatorial Guinea for example, is not only accused of pervasive corruption but also rife human rights abuses including detention of political opponents, torture, extrajudicial killings, interference in the judicial system, disregard for rule of law, widespread violence against women and impunity of security forces (Freedom House 2011: 14;USDS 2011).

Similarly, the government of Alhaji Yahaya Jammeh of The Gambia is blamed of related human rights abuses and violations (USDS2011). As stated earlier, although these violations have not resulted in violent conflicts in these countries, their linkages to political and internal tensions in both countries cannot be overlooked (McCryer2006). 10 For instance, since 1994, Yahaya Jammeh's 19-year regime has experienced over four attempted coups and several tensions (BBC News Africa 2012b).

Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in West Africa: Implications for Nigerian Security

The implications of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in West African Sub-region on Nigerian security cannot be overemphasized. Thus, flowing from the existing literatures, the following implications are drawn.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons such as pistols, revolvers, hunting rifles, craft weapons, pump-action shotguns and (light) machine guns such as Beretta 12S and AR-70, MAT 49, Sten MK 2, Czech Model 26 and Model 59 (Rachot), MG 36, Tokarev TT and Marakov PM pistols, AK-47, the German G3, the Belgian FN-FAL, the Czech machine guns and the Serbian RPGs (Bestman 2007) and other locally made SALM in West African Sub-region has led to rise of notorious and deadly armed militias that are capable of haltering the Nigerian security

architecture in almost all the geo-political zones of the country. Prominent among are the *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad (Boko Haram)*, *Ansaru (Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan)*, *Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA)* and other notorious deadly gangs headed by *Dan-Karami of Zurmi in Zamfara State*, *Alhaji Auta of Birnin Magaji in Zamfara State*, *Halilu of Chafe in Zamfara State*, *Turji of Isa in Zamfara State and Dogo Gide of Birnin Gwari in Kaduna State* in the northern part. Others are the *Ohaneze, MASSOB and IPOB* in the South –East, the *Niger Delta Avengers (NDA)*, the *Niger-Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF)* and the *Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)* in the oil-rich South-South to mention but few. To buttress the extent of SALWs in the non-state actors in Nigeria, studies have shown that there are over 60,000 weapons in circulation in the Northwest. Sheikh Ahmad Gumi as quoted Rufa'i (2021) provided an estimate of over 100,000 arms and ammunition in the hands of the bandit. A Bandit leader also lamented that 'There are more weapons than cattle in Zamfara' and also owning a gun was more profitable than herds of cattle (Rufa'i, 2021)

The resultant effect of the above unfortunate situation is the explosion of a culture of violence among more than 350 ethnic groups that make up the country. Consequently each group as a result of the accessibility and availability of SALWs is ready to resort to violence and conflict at the slightest instance as demonstrated by ethno-religious conflicts in states like Plateau, Bauchi, Kaduna, Taraba to mention but few. Armed robberies in almost all the angles of the country; kidnapping for ransoms also in almost all part of north west geo-political zone; banditry in states like Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Niger; farmers – herders' conflicts especially in the North-Central region of the country. States like Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa have been reduced to theatres of violent confrontations between these two groups. Recently, in Omala Local Government Area (LGA) of Kogi State, armed men attacked the Bagana, Agojeju-Odo, and Agbenema communities in the LGA leaving over 40 persons reportedly dead and property worth millions of Naira destroyed.

Consequently upon the above unfortunate scenario, displacement of millions of people who would have contributed to the development of their homeland becomes order of the day. To buttress this argument, the security crisis particularly the Boko Haram terrorism have led to the displacement of over 1.5 million Nigerians in the three states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe (Mohammed, 2018). Also Mohammed (2018) pointed out that over 9 million people have been affected by the violence, and more than third of the affected people are in acute need of humanitarian assistance. In addition, the conflict in Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, Nasarawa and Taraba states has led to the displacement of over 300,000 persons (ICG, 2021; ISS, 2021). Moreover about 135,000 Nigerians have fled to neighboring countries; the report by IMC (2021).

Nwagboso (2012) and Call (2000) maintain that, insecurity is a drain on local and national resources at the expense of development and peoples' well-being thereby, having adverse consequences on economic growth and development. Buttressing this argument, it was estimated that the defence budget in Nigeria has been increased over the last few years. For instance, in 2021, the defence budget stood at N966.4 billion but rose to N1.2 trillion in 2022 and then to N1.383 trillion in 2023. The defence budget for the current 2024 is N1.647 trillion (PLAC, 2024). All this was an attempt geared towards the logistical cum strategic empowerment and equipment of the Nigerian security agents/agencies to checkmate the situation or state of security and to enhance, strengthen and reinforce the Nigerian security architecture. This huge amount

could have been used to initiate developmental programmes for sustainable national development.

Decay of infrastructural facilities is also an ugly effect of SALWP in West Africa on Nigerian security architecture. This is for the fact that the proliferated SALW as pointed above has led to general insecurity in the country (Nigeria) and consequently as rightly observed by Achumba, Ighomereho and Akpor-Robaro (2013) that “insecurity destroys existing infrastructures and also prevent an environment for the development of further infrastructures; and a safe environment for economic activities by individuals to give them economic empowerment that will enable households not only to cater for their present generations but also to provide for future generations”

Last the security crisis in Nigeria caused by the proliferation SALW in West African sub-region has also affects Nigeria’s relation with other countries. This is as a result of the constant attacks by some armed non-states in the country. In fact many countries began to issue travel warning to their citizens about the dangers involved in travelling and doing business in some parts of the country. Precisely, the United State warned its citizens of the risk of coming to Nigeria, with particular emphasis to Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Abia, Edo, Imo, Jos, Bauchi, Gombe, Yobe and Borno (Mohammed, 2015) and this as argued by Adebayo (2014) has a grave consequences for the development and the general security of the country.

From the foregoing analysis, surface to point out that, Nigeria’s security has been seriously affected over time with the way and the manner arms are circulating in the hand of private individuals, small firms and other non-state actors in the country. They employ to large possible extent the small ammunitions to fight communal clashes, militancy and to the large extent terrorism against their potential enemies or state institutions. Thus, the state has to sacrifice or commit all its resources for the preservation its territorial integrity, sovereignty and cooperate existence which all importance segments of Nigeria’s security. Such consequences include the followings:

Conclusion

To conclude, it an undeniable fact the extent and nature at which small arms and light weapons proliferate in West African sub-region has far-reaching effects on Nigerian security in particular as well as Africa at large. This is evidently clear when one observe how ethnic and religious violence armed banditry, farmers – herders’ clashes, kidnapping for ransom, which are prevalent throughout the country’s (Nigeria) national territory nowadays changes dimension and magnitude. Surface to argue that the emergence and continued proliferation of vigilante groups, ethnic and sectional militias as well as secessionist or separatist groups in Nigeria is intricately connected with ways and manner the small arms and light weapons circulate with West Africa sub-region.

Recommendations

To curtail all these insecurity situations caused by SALW proliferation, government and other security stakeholders should as matter of urgency adopt and implement the following long-lasting security measures:

- i. The paper recommend that, combating security crises caused by SALW proliferation should be situated within the socio-economic well-being of the country and also to embrace vital aspects of social and national development, such as the provision of employment opportunities, strengthening poverty alleviation programme, provision of social amenities and other basic infrastructural facilities that are vital for satisfying individuals' basic needs.
- ii. Severe punishment should be reserved to any convicted corrupt public office holders to serve as deterrence to others. This is because, the existing literatures revealed that despite the huge amount of budgetary allocation engulfed by the security sector it has contributed insignificantly to the curbing of security crisis or countering terrorists activities because of high level of political and bureaucratic corruption which has been acknowledged by several analysts and observers of Nigerian politics as the hidden disease and blight of development in the country.
- iii. As matter of urgency, Nigerian government should constitute a team of experts and academicians to forecast, strategized and redesign the Nigeria's security architecture in order to be proactively ready to prevent and control acts of terrorism even before they occur. This is achievable through training and retraining of security agencies so that they can be in tune with modern technology and devices that can measure up to the standards of their counter-parts in developed countries.
- iv. Government and other security stakeholders should equip and support our security men with modern sophisticated security equipment so as to motivate and reinforce them to squarely address our perennial problem of porous border
- v. Government and security men should pay serious attention in gathering intelligent report which would enable them to act against all odds in mapping out the holistic security strategy in protecting the people lives and properties.
- vi. Harsh laws must be formulated and implemented against any person or agency involves in arms trafficking.
- vii. Community members must be educated and empowered to give security information to the relevant authorities

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