

# Is ‘Silencing the Guns’ Achievable in Africa: Drawing Lessons from Conflict Transformation

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**ABSTRACT:** The continuing insecurity, instability, disruption of political harmony, erosion of social cohesion, destruction of the economic fabric and public despondency in various parts of Africa call on the Peace and Security Council (PSC) to play a locomotive role in spearheading strategic interventions to put this sad situation to an end. Most crises and violent conflicts in Africa are being driven by poverty, economic hardships, violation or manipulation of constitutions, violation of human rights, exclusion, inequalities, marginalization and mismanagement of Africa’s rich ethnic diversity, as well as relapses into the cycle of violence in some post-conflict settings and external interference in African affairs. Undoubtedly, these challenges can be overcome, as long as the correct remedies are identified and are applied. Following the adoption of the “*Silencing the Guns*” initiative by the Fifth African Union High-Level Retreat on the Promotion of Peace, Security and Stability in Africa, this study analyzes the failures and successes of this initiative towards current happenings, and what can still be done through a conflict transformation perspective. While using practical examples, a range of methods used in conflict transformation, and combining theoretical inputs on specific conflict transformation initiative and processes, it remains important to note that every conflict is different and will require its own tailored-made approach to understanding and solving it.

**KEYWORDS:** African Union, Conflict transformation, Peace and Security, Silencing the guns

## Introduction

As the question continues to pop up; can we have a conflict-free Africa? African nations have been ravaged by numerous conflicts for the past years and presently the problem is far from being abated. This remains a challenge to its peace and security in global times as most conflicts result from poverty, inequalities, tribalism, oppression, bad governance and leadership, all too easily associated with authoritarian and long-lasting regimes that have led to increase poverty and economic disproportionality on the down-trodden. In their article (Bakken and Siri 2018, 3), states that the past six decades, has witnessed very severe civil wars in the African Continent. Some of the deadliest conflicts, such as the Biafran War in Nigeria in the 60s and 70s, the Congo Wars and the Rwandan genocide in the 90s, and the Ethiopian and Eritrean war in 1999 –2000, have come to an end. Yet, in recent years, the number of conflicts has grown substantially there has been a marked increase in the number of state-based conflicts in Africa over the past five years. In 2017, Africa experienced 18 state-based conflicts. While this is a decrease from the all-time high of 21 conflicts in 2016, it is substantially higher than ten years ago. In addition, there has been a marked increase in the number of state-based conflicts in Africa over the past five years. In 2017, Africa experienced 18 state-based conflicts. While this is a decrease from the all-time high of 21 conflicts in 2016, it is substantially higher than ten years ago. What is the cause of the sharp increase? The main driver of the increased number of conflicts is the involvement of IS in existing conflicts. For example, IS has gained traction in the area around Lake Chad, where there are already Islamic conflicts taking place. Thus, the conflict in Northern Nigeria is no longer just a conflict between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram, but also between the Nigerian government and IS. In 2017, five of the state-based conflicts in Africa were related to IS, in Chad, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Niger. Further, while the number of conflicts has increased substantially, the number of countries in which conflicts are taking place has increased only slightly. In 2007, Africa saw 12 conflicts in 10 countries. Ten years later, in 2017, the number of conflicts was 18, taking place in 13 different countries. This suggests that while the number of actors involved in conflicts within

each country has increased, possibly increasing the complexity of conflict, the geographic span has not enlarged to the same extent. And until 2000, the number of people killed in state-based conflict corresponds to some extent with the growth in the number of conflicts.

However, in the past few years, the increase in conflict numbers has not been accompanied by a corresponding growth in battle deaths. In 2017, state-based violent conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa have been responsible for the direct and indirect deaths of millions of civilians and has contributed significantly to the low levels of human security in the region. The countries of sub-Saharan Africa that have been embroiled in violent conflict are characterized by abject poverty, inadequate service provision, political instability, retarded economic growth and other challenges to overall development that deter the enhancement of human security. The successful and sustainable resolution of these conflicts represents an enormous barrier to future prosperity in the region. (Arusha AU High Level Retreat Report 2014, 8). A major challenge in Africa's peace and security field is how to secure lasting resolutions to conflicts. Several regions in Africa have experienced armed wars caused by the resurgence of old problems previously deemed to have been resolved, or those that were managed to the point of dialogue. About half of all post-conflict countries relapse into conflict within a decade (Opongo 2013, 94). As policy makers, leaders, and scholars what actions can we take, and what lessons can we draw from both current and historical conflicts about the most effective strategies and tactics in internal conflicts. Can insurgents be defeated by silencing guns? How can governments undermine support for rebel forces by providing security and public goods to civilians? What will it take to silence the guns in Africa the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As academic researchers we must hold open questions that mean well for what future we want, and that guides us to achieve lasting solutions to local and global problems that inspires our work for a common struggle in transforming conflicts for a better world.

### **The African Union's (AU) Agenda for Africa in Resolving Conflict**

From 21 to 23 October 2014, the African Union (AU), in collaboration with the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania, hosted the Fifth High-Level Retreat on the Promotion of Peace, Security and Stability in Africa. Held in Arusha, Tanzania, and supported by the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) and Institute for Security Studies (ISS), the retreat brought together a range of senior representatives from the African Union Commission (AUC), including the commissioner for peace and security and special envoys, special representatives and distinguished mediators. Also in attendance were members of the African Union Panel of the Wise (AU PW) and Friends of the Panel of the Wise, senior representatives of the continent's regional economic communities (RECs) and regional mechanisms (RMs), as well as eminent officials from the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), League of Arab States, and civil society organizations. Convened under the theme 'Silencing the guns – owning the future', the objective of the retreat was to provide a platform for delegates to take stock of the paradox that is Africa in terms of unprecedented levels of economic growth on one hand, and rising instability and insecurity in a number of particularly concerning regions and member states on the other. Recognizing this, and building on references to Agenda 2063 and the AU's 50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration (2013) vision of ending all wars in Africa by 2020 and 'silencing the guns' (also known as Vision 2020), the retreat further sought to provide a platform for collective multi-stakeholder deliberations on existing and emerging peace and security threats to the continent, and the responses required to address these and achieve a war-free continent by 2020.

### **Efforts in Tackling the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons**

The illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) destabilizes communities, negatively impacts security and compromises development in Africa. It is interesting to note that

SALW are the main instruments used in armed conflicts in Africa, and that the persistence and increasing number of wars on the continent can partially be attributed to the illegal proliferation of small arms (Eneka 2012, 21-33). Small arms include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. Light weapons include heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems and mortars of calibres less than 100 millimetres (Organization of African Unity and Institute for Security Studies 1998). Only a very small percentage of these weapons are produced on the continent; the majority are introduced via illegal channels (Institute for Security Studies n.d.).

(Statistics on the terrible impacts of the proliferation of SALW in Africa identify the phenomenon posing one of the biggest hurdles to development on the continent. Over the last 50 years, Africa has suffered no less than five million fatalities, attributed to SALW (Ahere and Ouko in Arusha AU High Level Retreat Report 2012, 15). These deaths have been caused by the estimated 30 million firearms on the continent. SALW have serious impacts on the trajectory of socio-political and economic development in Africa, contributing to weakening affected governments' abilities to function effectively. During civil strife, their widespread use triggers humanitarian disasters, which impede sustainable peace. They also threaten civil aviation growth, which is an important catalyst of development in a globalizing world. The spread of SALW also contributes to long-term societal re-engineering that encourages and glorifies gun culture, while increasing propensity to use force to resolve conflicts within specific social groupings, particularly where violence, massive organized crime or political brinkmanship have been part of a community for a long period of time. A number of continental protocols are in conceived to deal with the menace of SALW in Africa. Key ones include the:

- i. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa, which was adopted and signed in Abuja, Nigeria, on 31 October 1998 by ECOWAS heads of state and government
- ii. October 1999 OAU Decision on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons taken by heads of state and government of the OAU at its 35th session held in Algiers, Algeria
- iii. Southern African Development Community (SADC) Council Decision on the Prevention and Combating of Illicit Trafficking in Small Arms and Related Crimes which was taken in Maputo, Mozambique on 17 and 18 August 1999
- iv. March 2000 Nairobi Declaration on the Problem of the Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa, passed by representatives of governments based in the affected regions. Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons, made in December 2000 by member states of the OAU at a meeting in Bamako, Mali. In intensifying efforts to silence the guns by 2020, it will be important for stakeholders to reflect on the aforementioned initiatives, gauge their successes and evaluate their challenges and, based on these assessments, implement realistic actions.

### **Current conflict Trends: Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis as a failed Model under AU's Silencing the Guns**

The African Union's 'Silencing the guns' initiative continues to look to many as a policy –making achievement that was endorsed by all member states but not one that could be seen with visible results. There is no African state that can account for efforts made as it is already gone pass 2020. We clearly see this in a country like Cameroon going through a current conflict. Violence has

taken a toll on the minority English speaking regions, known as the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The war which spans four years and still going has been a battle between government forces and separatists from the English-speaking background. The separatists have been fighting for their own independent country called ‘Ambazonia’, due to long years of marginalization, poverty and the feeling of not belonging. Often described as the Anglophone crisis, the conflict has left more than 3000 dead, 534, 000 displaced persons with an increasing amount of them running into neighboring Nigeria for their safety. Casualties have been on both sides between state and non-state actors, including the vulnerable population. In 2018, the Norwegian Refugee Council named it as the most neglected crisis in history. So far, Human rights groups and members of the international community continue to call for ceasefire and proper dialogue based on negotiations from the government in particular, and both parties in general. But, such call has only fallen on deaf ears as no party heeds to it. The question now is what does silencing the guns really mean for Africa and how effective? Especially when African governments are the biggest perpetrators of heavily militarizing their own communities often times putting the the masses at the disadvantage and risk of battling for their very own lives. According to (Patricia Lynne Sullivan 2019, 2220) proceeding from the assumption that violence against civilians is strategic, multiple studies have found evidence that governments are more likely to engage in mass killing to counter guerilla insurgents, as opposed to conventionally structured opposition forces (Valentino 2014, 375-407). Because the support of the population is so critical to irregular forces, and guerilla forces themselves can be difficult to target, governments may target civilians in terror campaigns designed to deter them from providing materials, protection, and intelligence to the rebels (Balcells and Kalyvas 2014; Downes 2008; Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004). (Krcmaric 2018, 18-31), however, argues that governments should be less likely to victimize civilians in guerilla wars precisely because these wars are a contest between the government and the rebels for the “HaM” of the population. In support of his argument, he finds that mass killing is more likely in civil wars fought with conventional military strategies than in armed conflicts against guerilla forces. Many African governments continue to use arms and force as an enforcement for their military’s’ might and power. Thus, allowing us to ponder on the issue why militaries should be heavily equipped with arms in the first place that simply allows for gross brutality, on communities within nations that disproportionately suffer socially, economically, and politically. On the one hand, it shows the impossibility of putting a total embargo to the proliferation of arms coming into Africa. On another, lifting arms embargo would only strengthen those who seek to amass weapons for their own political gain and sign the death sentences of civilians desperate for an end to the suffering caused by these weapons. As we reflect on what it is about political power that some with access use it to hurt or squash their people rather than lift them up, (Chris Nshimbi, n.d) notes “the efforts to ‘silence the guns’ has been singularly ineffective. Conflicts in Africa have increased since the signing of the pledge. For meaningful progress to be made, the African Union needs to recognize this, and design solutions to conflicts that are informed by the need to protect human rights. The continental body should be empowered to act against any party that violates core values centered on human dignity. Secondly, given that many reasons are internal, arising from the grievances citizens have with their governments, this internal dynamic appears to have been ignored from the outset.” Proponents of the aforementioned initiative contend that the continent needs its own solutions, which will take into consideration factors that suit the particular conditions of the region (e.g., ethnic groups, ancestral and cultural heritage and religious ties, etc.) (Ngomba-Roth 2008). Undoubtedly, the AU and its member states have been adept at developing ideas on how to resolve the continent’s peace and security challenges with African statesmen, with negotiators taking center stage in efforts to resolve various conflicts on the continent. According to many analysts, however, significant challenges still remain, ranging from insufficient technical capacity and expertise, as well as lack of political will to oversee and ensure the implementation of genuine solutions. In addition, the role of non-African actors remains largely inadvertent in the interdependent global system, which is understandable

when contemplating gaps in Africa's capacity to address its challenges. In other words, Africa's problems are also linked to those of the world (the opposite applies too) and it wise not to completely lock out ideas from external actors just because they are non-African. The ideas should instead be considered on their own merit before being applied or declined. In the context of this debate, it is important to make plans based on the results of candid inclusive discussions on Africa's capacity and preparedness to pursue sustainable solutions to the internal and external factors that drive and sustain violent conflicts on the continent. African leadership should be built on promoting good governance and wellbeing of the populace, not propping up rabidly oppressive dictators and ignoring political abuses.

### **How much Commitment is Needed for AU Member States?**

The effectiveness of a supranational institution is highly dependent on the political will and commitment of its member states. For the AU to achieve success in spearheading the realization of Vision 2020, it is imperative that it receives support from its member states. The member states must be willing to sign, ratify and domesticate existing normative frameworks on peace, security and governance. Experts posit that sustaining a credible framework and system of legal rights and obligations requires strong monitoring and surveillance mechanisms (Ross-Larson 2004, 24). Simply put, the AU cannot expect to succeed if it depends solely on unenforceable protocols whose implementation depends on the best intentions of member states. Political will, where present, needs to be reinforced with financial commitments since, as it stands, many concerned countries are in arrears as far as AU membership contributions are concerned (Ajayi and Oshewolo 2013, 3-16). It is undeniable that the success of the AU is largely dependent on its ability to self-fund the implementation of its programs. To ensure and protect the financial sustainability of the organization, member states ought to incorporate financial subscriptions to the AU into their national budgets. The AU should also explore means of generating funds from the continent, but outside member states' contributions. This could involve, for example, forming or making use of existing continental financial institutions like the African Development Bank (AfDB) to invest in high-return global financial investments.

### **International Allies and What Sanctions to Non-Retreat to a Call to Ceasefire?**

As recent as March 2020, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Gutierrez, issued an urgent appeal for a global ceasefire in all corners of the world for all warring parties to lay down their weapons in support of the battle against COVID-19. Even though warring parties were supposed to pull back from hostilities and put aside mistrust and animosity, security and peace measures remain questionable up till date as to what sanctions were put in place for warring parties. As we question, how do we halt the turmoil? Conflicts are on the surge in Africa as a non-retreat to the ceasefire continues to be observed by warring parties throwing communities into turmoil. But this also offers a chance to reassess what changes can be made to ensure that future generations inherit a world that is safe, secure and protects the most vulnerable. A number of agencies are well positioned to strengthen their work in the area of peace and security. The agencies and staff of the United Nations and other Peace-Keeping International organizations have both the opportunity and the challenge to address the impact of war. Since the 1990s, the practice of the UNSC in terms of sanctions has gone through marked changes that have opened up avenues for research (Eriksson and Wallenstein 2015, 1839-1840). First, it has moved from comprehensive to targeted sanctions (so-called 'smart sanctions'). Second, the scope of UN sanctions has increasingly expanded to target particular entities, including individuals, organizations and companies. This has opened up an entirely new research area in the sanctions field, in that previous scholarship looked mainly at the relations between the UN and governments. Third, there has been a new ambition to examine the impact of UN sanctions within individual cases, through the lens of

sanctions episodes. For example, there was repeated support in the UNSC for UN sanctions against Yugoslavia during the 1990s, even though the western countries and Russia had been supporting different actors during the conflict. The decisions on sanctions in the cases of international terrorism in 2001 and of Libya in 2011 follow a similar pattern. Sanctions remain a blunt instrument; but targeted sanctions have, in all likelihood, reduced the costs to both the sender and the targeted country, compared to the earlier, comprehensive type of sanctions. For instance, they do not involve the paralysis of an entire economy, and thus avoid the humanitarian consequences that were reported in the 1990s as ensuing from the comprehensive sanctions on Iraq. In sum, then, contemporary sanctions research has mainly been concerned with the degree of compliance with UN demands. Most often, the research focus relates to the onset, pursuit and ending of armed conflicts. This leads to a significant question—whether sanctions are more effective for one or the other general purpose. Here, we are particularly interested in the impact on armed conflicts.

### **Conflict Transformation. Why Not a People’s Centered Approach**

There is a lot sub-Sahara Africa can learn in terms of how conflict could be managed for positive conflict transformation and silencing the guns in Africa. So much effort has been made in tackling and resolving conflicts from a diplomatic perspective which has to do with looking up to governments, often times dictatorial regimes, and international organizations for actions. However, this takes a longer period depending on their diplomatic interest, as a helpless population waits for solutions and sanctions while many get killed in the course of war. There is always something to learn from history and from other countries that have been in similar situations. Countries such as Yemen, Morocco, Tajikistan, Denmark, Egypt and Kenya have used conflict transformation models (Dialogue, Mediation space and Diapraxis, Culturally-Balanced-Co-mediation, Ombudsperson, Early Warning and Rapid Response Mechanisms) that enabled them come out of conflict successfully while prohibiting the circulation of arms within their communities.

### **Method: Mediation and Diapraxis**

The notion of a mediation space does not conceive of mediation in the classical sense of negotiations supported by an acceptable third party. Rather it is a process involving the creation of social spaces between divided groups, as opposed to a process lodged in the work of an individual or small team (Owen and Lakhdar, 2013, 6). It can be understood as the interaction between two (or more) discourses as they confront each other and seek to coordinate their actions in a non-violent way. The concept of “diapraxis” complements the mediation space approach. Diapraxis is process whereby joint action between conflict actors is made a key goal of a dialogue or negotiation process, rather than only a dialogue aiming at understanding the other side, or talking for the sake of talking.

### **When and how to employ the approach**

Why employ the concept of a space? In a track-1 negotiation process there is no guarantee that decisions will translate down to the community level which is the level where people have the power to implement things. A mediation space aims bring together the people who have implementation power. This includes insiders from all sides who are connected to the issue, who have constituencies, who the interpreters of the founding discourse of their constituencies and constituencies with legitimacy support for whatever they have signed up to. It requires people who are willing to imagine a new future and who are willing to learn and get involved in the process. The concept is particularly helpful when working in contexts where parties hold different

worldviews because in such situation's discussions can be difficult and may require an approach different from a classical negotiation process

### **How the approach is different to a normal dialogue process?**

Dialogue is meeting the other to understand the other but it does not necessarily bring the parties further. It hopefully leads to confidence building but this is not always the case, especially when parties have different worldviews. When dialogue does not result in a change in actions it can actually deepen mistrust because things are not changing or things are misinterpreted. Talk is often not enough. Action is important. Parties may need to see the other side act in a way that builds trust. In order to find an outlet for action it is important to create something practical together that seeks to address an aspect of the conflict. Such practical ideas should come out of a dialogue between the parties rather than being imposed by one party or coming from the outside.

### **Setting Up the Process**

Define a space where interaction can take place. Participants need to feel it is a safe place for discussion so some “red lines” need to be established. These are lines everyone agrees they do not want to cross the discussion. To do this some sense of a basic common vision is needed but it does not require reaching agreement on doctrine or a worldview. A common vision can be as simple as “at some point we are going to have to live together”. Red lines are defined according to the context and according to the participants. They are not imposed but need to be agreed to by all participating parties. In such a process in Sri Lanka, for example, it was agreed nothing would be said against the Dharma (the teachings of Buddha), nothing against the government of Sri Lanka, and nothing that could antagonize the communities involved in the conflict. Agreeing the red lines is itself part of the process of discussion and can take time. As discussions progress to the practical, participants themselves start obtaining the thinking and the methodology of mediators. They start to think how to create new spaces and new roles. Discussion is mostly not about positions or interests. It focuses on practical ways forward. The hope is that participants begin to develop practical projects that deal with sensitive issues that are relevant to the transformation of conflict.

### **Case Study: TAJIKISTAN**

Between 1992 and 1997 Tajikistan experienced a very bloody civil war. Following the conflict, one of the perpetuating divisions in the country was between secularist forces (neo-communist, nearly all anti-religious) and Islamic forces a loose term for a wide variety of actors) who were allied to democratic forces. There was and still is today, huge mistrust between the two sides. During the civil war, the Islamic forces almost got the upper hand until the conflict was frozen and secular forces gradually gained in influence. The Secularists, who dominated the government, were afraid that the Islamic forces would use the mosques to preach and incite an uprising against the government. There was heavy repression of Islamic actors and spaces.

### **The Process**

German researchers at the Center for OSCE Research launched a dialogue process bringing together secular and Islamic actors. Out of this a document was drafted proposing areas for possible confidence-building measures which was sent the president of the republic. However, the document remained quite conceptual and abstract. The process was failing to build confidence and translate into practice so attention shifted to concrete projects, in order to build confidence. Working groups linked to the dialogue process were established which aimed to create new realities through projects. These working groups became mediation spaces where representatives

from secular groups, from the government, and from religious groups came together to discuss concrete issues.

### Lessons learned

- Focus on practical co-operation not value differences  
Debates about values or worldviews tended to divide the participants whereas a focus on confidence-building through practical co-operation on concrete issues helped to build confidence and common ground.
- Ideas for co-operation should be developed jointly  
For there to be ownership and commitment to pursue them, ideas for joint practical co-operation between the parties need to be jointly formulated and developed together, rather than imposed from outside.
- Jointly agreeing red step in a dialogue  
A mediation space requires the parties to agree the parameters for a dialogue. In defining parameters, it is often easier to find agreement on “red-lines”, i.e. things that should not be said or done rather than trying to formulate joint positive or aspiration guidelines.

### Conclusion

The method which is one of a wide variety of contexts, approaches and experiences of conflict transformation allows us to reflect on more ways in which we can create mitigating effects during a conflict with the possibility of dropping arms and creating peaceful communities. Conflict transformation aims to enable relationships of respect, cooperation and consent, and constructive means and norms for dealing with conflict. John Paul Lederach, who is both a scholar and practitioner, explains that he wanted to develop “constructive change” in order to describe constructive responses to violent conflict, and the terms resolution or management did not fit as well as transformation did. Furthermore, (Lederach 1996) argues that peacebuilding is a long and comprehensive process that must include cultural differences and include all levels of society, also the middle range leaders (defined as the ethnic religious leaders, academics and leaders of influential NGOs) because they connect the top (highest leaders of the government and the opposition) and bottom level actors (grassroots’ organizations involved at the community level) and can connect the opposing sides of the conflict(s). Also, it is respected middle range leaders that are important, because their strengths are not based on political or military power, but rather more on relationships. Understanding the key leaders and how they work is valuable.

For Albert (2008, 32), this will mean that determining the result of social change and emergent conflict is a combination of societal capacity and conflict triggers. If society has the capacity to manage the conflict, then a situation of cooperation amidst latent tension can arise and, if societal capacity is greater and conflict management can lead to conflict transformation, then an environment of peace is possible.

Achieving conflict transformation will mean working towards empowering men and women for change and reforming structures of power in favor of justice for all. Important components of this term is using a people-centered approach, as well as working on different levels – from global awareness, to lobby and advocacy, to grassroots’ movements. The editors of the book, *Acting Together* describe the transformation of conflict as: “working for greater social and economic justice by addressing oppressive dynamics, amplifying the voices of those in less powerful groups, and building coalitions for change. It includes nurturing relationships of respect, understanding, and trust across differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, age, economic class, sexuality, and national identities. In addition to transforming relationships, laws and policies must be changed so that a society’s institutions and cultural symbols are inclusive and supportive of the development of all groups.”

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