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## **Is the Spanish Army's Experimental Brigade 2035 a Result of Civil-military Relations? A Historical Overview (1923–2021)**

### **Abstract**

This article analyses the evolution of civil-military relations in Spain from 1923 to 2021. The research defines the role of the military organisation during two authoritarian regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century along with the country's democratic transition. After a historical overview, the military change process known as Experimental Brigade 2035 is selected as a case study to determine whether its origin is civilian or military in nature. The results of the research evidence the civilian influence in budgetary issues and limits in performance. At the same time, the military has a certain autonomy to implement modernisation plans in the framework of assigned competences.

**Keywords:** Military Change, Spain, Civil-Military Relations, Spanish Army

### **Introduction**

Civil-military relations in democratic systems are based on the military's subordination to civil power (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1971). Armies are public organisations able to use legitimate violence, but they are obliged to present accountability as regards the use of force. A huge part of the scientific literature about political influence over military change is focused on political systems which have not experienced military interventionism in their past (Posen, 1984). Due to this fact, the historical

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dependence and evolution of armies' tasks and functions should be taken into account in some cases.

Despite the fact that, currently, civil-military relations in Spain are consolidated, the evolution of military organisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century must be analysed to cover explicative voids related to military change. This article develops an analysis of the military's role in Spain's political system from 1923 to 2021, combining historical research with 22 personal interviews.<sup>1</sup> This study focuses on the military's transformation from an autonomous actor to a fully-integrated institution in the democratic system. The historical background led the researcher to choose a current military change initiative, denominated as Experimental Brigade 2035,<sup>2</sup> which has continued during the context of political change in Spain, to define whether it is the result of civil-military relations.

Previous research about military change in the Spanish Army during the Moroccan War evidenced explicative shortcomings in the civil-military paradigm in Spain (López-Rodríguez, 2019). With regard to the results, the lack of civilian input in military transformations during authoritarian spells was clear. From this, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (I) How did civil-military relations evolved in Spain during the 20<sup>th</sup> century? (II) Over which dimensions of military change do civilian decision-makers have influence? In addition, as regards the current process of military change in the Spanish Army, (III) is BRIEX 2035 a result of civil-military relations in Spain? To answer these research questions, the main objective is to analyse the evolution of civil-military relations in Spain, the specific objectives being: (I) to study the evolution of the military's role in the Spanish political system, (II) to analyse the current state of civil-military relations in Spain, and (III) to determine the source which prompted the BRIEX 2035 initiative.

This article exposes a historical approach to military change and the role of armies in political processes. The theoretical background focuses on the civil-military relations paradigm and its inherent debates regarding authoritarian regimes. The results paint a picture of the authoritarian regimes of General Primo de Rivera (1923–1930) and General Franco (1939–1975), followed by the political transformation of the Armed Forces during the country's Democratic Transition and consolidation (1975–1981). After the historical overview, the analysis is developed by studying the military change process known as BRIEX 2035 which has taken place in the context of political alternation.

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<sup>1</sup> 22 personal interviews were conducted (2019–2021). The interviews were anonymous, so the names have been withheld and changed by EP code.

<sup>2</sup> Known hereafter as BRIEX 2035.

## **Military Change and Political Processes**

Civil-military relations have shown that military changes come from the political/civilian level (Posen, 1984). This implies a top-down process in which civilian decision-makers design programs of change which the military then implement (Jordán, 2017). In the US military, there is a balanced relationship between political power, responsibility over the use of force, and a subordination of military organisation (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1971; Andreski, 1971). Academic research has often remarked upon a divergence between political directives and the use of military force due to the fact that, sometimes, civilians lack tactical and operational knowledge over the administration of violence (Nielsen, 1999; Rapp, 2015).

The specifications of the use of force lead one to understand civil-military relations as a balance and not just as a dependence and submission of military power (Albright, 1980). The civil-military relations paradigm defends the military as a source of authority in operational planning in which relationships must be fluent (Bienen, 1981). The inclusion of a civilian perspective in military planning can also prevent military stagnation, thus providing new perspectives (Buley, 2007). Relation-building between both sectors can be more easily built by personal relationships, configured around the comprehension of the use of force and the degree of political interference at operational levels (Smith, 2008; Rapp, 2015).

In an authoritarian context with precarious power balances, civilian interference in military affairs can not only be dangerous, but can also be lethal to those civilians involved (Bukkvoll, 2015). The civil-military relations in authoritarian regimes are conditioned by the presence or not of other security institutions to balance military power (Brooks, 1998; Bou-Nassif, 2015). The prevention of military intervention in politics is defined as *coup-proofing*, often based on ties of loyalty with officers due to ethnic, religious, political or personal links, or also by guaranteeing economic, professional or social privileges (Brooks, 1998; Belkin, Schofer, 2005). The debate around civil-military relations in authoritarian contexts gains complexity in political systems ruled by militaries, or where there is a tradition of military intervention in politics such as Spain during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chehabi, Linz, 1998; Tselis, 2001; Lewis, 2002).

Multiple classifications of non-democratic regimes identified hybridations related to the relevance of military, personalist, and unique-party influence (Geddes, 1999; Szmolka, 2011; 2013; 2014). In those in

which the military plays a key role, some can include features related to Sultanism (Chehabi, Linz, 1998) or Pretorianism (Haddad, 2014). The military's role varies depending on each case-study, but the lower tendency of military regimes to enter into conflict with other States due to their internal orientation of the use of force has been remarked upon (Andreski, 1980; Miller, 1995; Debs, 2010; Svolikim, 2013). In authoritarian regimes, military organisations are a key actor against political subversion (Brooks, 1998; Albrecht, 2015; Bou-Nassif, 2015).

Especially after long-lasting authoritarian regimes, the transition to democracy can be conditioned by authoritarian legacies from the previous political system. Indicators point to a higher likelihood of the military to maintain the status quo rather than create political upset. This can imply that the military can abandon formal power positions but keep effective power, thereby making transference to civilian authorities superficial (Penecy, Butler, 2004). In other cases, it has been stated that militaries have more interest in obtaining new spaces of power in the democratic system, focusing on professional pride and integration with other bureaucratic institutions rather than the political domination (Pion-Berlin, 1992).

## **Civil-military Relations in Spain (1923–2021) A Historical Background of Civil-military Relations in Spain**

### *The Dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera (1923–1930)*

The *pronunciamento militar*<sup>3</sup> of Primo de Rivera in 1923 was a corporative intervention of the Spanish Army in the political process. The institution established a military regime, creating a political mindset by the transference of military values to civilian life (González-Martínez, 2000). This particular form of military intervention was a consequence of Spanish political, social, and economic instability at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The security situation was not only worsened by constant strikes and demonstrations, but also due to the fighting in industrial areas between anarchists and gunslingers hired by businessmen and organised in the so-called “Sindicatos Libres”. Violence in the streets also affected politicians, as experienced by President Eduardo Dato who was killed in 1921 by three anarchists. The generalised situation of violence led to the need for military intervention in order to restore public security.

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<sup>3</sup> Spanish original: It refers to non-violent military intervention in politics. It was the norm in Spain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the military took political power by having high-ranking officers appointed as Ministers or Prime Ministers.

Military organisations had been central to the political system, as the Spanish Constitution of 1876 defined public security as an exclusive competence of the Guardia Civil and the Army. This turned both into responsible institutions of internal stability, additionally increasing their power in the political system. Another key element of civil-military relations was the Moroccan War, whose only solution was direct military intervention (Sueiro, 1998; López-Rodríguez, 2019). As regards public security on the Iberian Peninsula and military operations in the Moroccan Protectorate, there was a favourable attitude from King Alfonso XIII towards the military which allowed for the *pronunciamiento* in 1923. The militarism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not just a unique feature of Spain; it was also a common choice as regards other kings and emperors such as those who led pre-WWI Germany, Russia, and England, all of which gave European militaries a higher degree of freedom.

The contexts of the political and social also affected relationships within military organisations. Since the beginning of the Moroccan War, there were constant corporative tensions within the army. Officers deployed in Morocco were obtaining faster professional promotions, higher economic benefits, and more political influence than those on the Iberian Peninsula. This led to division within the Spanish Army, embodied between the *Junteros* (Officers in the Iberian Peninsula) and *Africanistas* (Officers in the Moroccan Protectorate). The first group organised the *Juntas de Defensa* to influence civilian power so as to obtain the same economic and corporative benefits as those militaries deployed in Africa. Despite the internal tensions, the intra-military conflict was not as intense as the rivalry between the civilian and military powers. Conflicts arising as a result of inefficient civilian crisis-management in the Moroccan War led to almost full support for Primo de Rivera's coup in 1923 (Cruz, 2001; González-Martínez, 2000).

Spain's military victory in the Moroccan War solved the crisis in the Protectorate (López-Rodríguez, 2019), contributing to an improvement and consolidation of the public image of the dictator. Despite the victory, Primo de Rivera didn't succeed in turning his military regime into a fascist entity similar to that of Italy or Portugal. He also failed in the creation of a Corporative Workers' Union, in addition to the fact that his political party, *Unión Patriótica*, was not particularly stable. The same happened when he tried to create a party militia, which was spoiled by internal military pressures. During this political period, the Spanish Army was a key actor which allowed the dictator to gain power, but which also forced him to abandon it in 1930. This period saw the direct participation of militaries in the political process. This was due to the fact that they were

the capstone of the regime and their power was superior even to that of the leader. Despite the inclusion of civilian decision-makers in 1926, the military had given itself a unilateral ability to influence transformation and change.

### ***The Dictatorship of General Franco (1939–1975)***

The military institution also had a core role in the consolidation and stabilisation of Franco's regime (Preston, 1967; Reniú, 2018). Experiences lived by Franco during the Moroccan War allowed him to establish solid personal and professional relationships with other *Africanistas*. This enabled him to obtain the support of the main part of the military officers during the failed *coup d'état* in 1936 which derived into the Civil War. Despite political internal support (which varied depending both on the Spanish and international context), the military provided full support to the regime (Mir, 1982; Lewis, 2002). In contrast with other authoritarian regimes which required coup-proof institutions (Bou-Nassif, 2015), during the dictatorship in Spain, the process was quite different. Instead of creating separate organisations, Franco erased the police corps such as *Guardia de Asalto*, and militarised all security institutions, and achieved the military's support by identifying the idea of Spain with the regime itself. At the same time, the political organisation of the regime led to the establishing of three separate military ministries (the Army, Air Force, and Navy).

Francoism also achieved popular and military loyalty by building a hegemonic concept as regards the idea of Spain. According to theories of populism, there was a link built over the meaning and significance (Laclau, 2016) between Spain as a State and nation with the moral and ideological body of the regime. The identification between Spain and the moral of the regime increased the difficulty to determine the adscription of the army with the State, the political regime, and its degree of compromise with society (Gaub, 2014). In Spain's case, an initial identification between regime and State led to an implication of the Armed Forces with Spain and the Spanish people, which was a key factor during the democratic transition and the later support of the Armed Forces as regards the Spanish Monarchy.

During Francoism, the use of military force was designated to internal control. This had been present in other dictatorships (Andreski, 1980), in that the use of violence as a political tool was conditioned during Francoism by the political characteristics of each phase of the regime (Debs, 2010; Svolicikim, 2013). In Spain, the use of military force was more

present during the post-war period, developing military operations in non-peninsular territories such as Ifni (1956–1958), Ecuatorial Guinea (1968), and the Spanish Sahara (1973–1975). Military deployments abroad were almost non-existent, and those which did occur were just to fulfil certain international agreements, as was the deployment of Spanish military doctors in the Vietnam War (Santamarta del Pozo, 2017; Criado Gutiérrez, 2016).

### ***The Spanish Military During the Democratic Transition and Consolidation (1975–1981)***

The transformation of military's role in the political system is an essential condition to guarantee peaceful and stable democratic transitions (Martínez et al., 2013). When studying the Spanish case, it is not unusual to find comparisons with Portugal as both have experienced democratic transitions in the same time frame, and the respective militaries were key actors in those processes. One of the first differences found is the disruptive position of the Portuguese military in 1974 in contrast to the sustainable approach adopted by the Spanish Military in 1975 (Olivas Osuna, 2019).

Regarding the relationship between militaries and regimes, Portugal's military was once subordinated to authoritarian civilian power. There were also security institutions that provided protection against coups as a security-based service, and there was a feeling of resentment in the military towards the regime due to the hard conditions of the African wars which led them to support the Carnation Revolution (Lewis, 2002). However, military power was core in the Spanish regime, and despite the negative predisposition of the military to abandon the Sahara, officers were loyal to high-ranking decision-makers, and there were not enough officers against the policies of the regime to create a similar situation as in Portugal. This was evidenced in the TV coverage of the withdrawal of Spanish troops from the Sahara in 1975, when the last Legionary Officer there was interviewed in the military base:

Journalist: "Is this the way out you would have liked for your soldiers, captain?"

Spanish Captain: "My men go fully proud and with their honour untouched, even raised, as they have achieved their duty. Our duty was what we were ordered [to do]. Maybe I personally would have rather [had] other solutions, but my men go out from here with the highest honour they can find" (20<sup>th</sup> December 1975, Spanish National TV).

Military loyalty to the regime led Transitional Prime Minister Adolfo Suarez to consider the army a relevant political actor in the democratic



transition. Understanding the context, Suarez appointed General Gutierrez Mellado, a high-ranking officer of repute since the Civil War, as Deputy Prime Minister (1976–1981) and later as the first Minister of Defense (1977–1979). His appointment led to a unifying of former military ministries and the beginning of the transformation of Spanish Armed Forces. General Gutierrez Mellado focused on transforming and modernising the Spanish military, guaranteeing military support for his decisions through his military rank. Administrative and organisational reforms allowed for the building of civil-military relations, and the legal framework was flexible and permissive enough with military freedom of action as it allowed ambiguous interpretations of the rules in the command chain (Puell de la Villa, 2005; Martinez, 2011).

Nevertheless, tensions between military and civilian decision-makers were constant during the country's transition and the first phase of its democracy. Between some cases, a first trial of a military *coup d'état* was avoided in 1978, known as *Operacion Galaxia*. Despite Spanish intelligence aborting it, a relevant number of military officers knew about it yet did not report it. That evidenced higher levels of officer loyalty to the military organisation than to the recent civilian government of Adolfo Suarez (Balbé, 1983). It was not until the *coup d'état* in 1981 did the Spanish Armed Forces remain loyal to the monarchy and democracy by not joining most of its officers in the coup, thereby avoiding it (Olivas Osuna, 2019).

## **The Current State of Civil-military Relations in Spain**

The Spanish Armed Forces have experienced core transformations since the beginning of the country's democracy. During the 1980s, Spain joined NATO, the EU, and adopted a professional approach, building an expeditionary culture (López-Rodríguez, 2022a). These elements contribute towards developing the military as a tool of the State's power, increasing political influence over military change. This epigraph analyses the dimensions of civilian influence, to later study the origin of military change initiative BRIEX 2035, developed during a period of political alternation (2017–2021).

### ***Political Influence over Strategic Scenarios and Budgetary Policy***

This study shows that all military members interviewed stated that military change must be approved by political power. As was remarked at the theoretical level, civilian influence over military change can happen at



diverse levels (Posen, 1984). In the Spanish Army, the military remarked, as a key dimension, the work-life balance (EP02, EP13), and budgetary assignation (EP01, EP02, EP03, EP07, EP09, EP13, EP18, EP21). Budgetary assignation conditions the ability to acquire and modernise military equipment and doctrine (EP02, EP13).

“Logically, political power is the one which distribute means, credit, and budgets. So it has great power, right? Because bringing about change or innovation without having the money or investment is difficult. Yes, I think that true change has to come from the top. It is true that in the Spanish Army, competences are the proposals of improvement and to mark the direction of the Army's evolution” (EP01, 2019).

“They are also trying to make the armed forces, within the nation's capabilities, to be as efficient as possible (...). That's basically the case, in some parameters or in almost all of them, but mainly in terms of expenditure. So we're gonna (sic) try to ensure that the spending we can afford with regard to Defense is as efficient as possible so that we have have a modern armed forces” (EP02, 2019).

Related to military performance, the political level defines operational frameworks and strategic scenarios (EP06, EP07, EP10, EP11, EP12, EP14, EP15, EP16), seeking to use the military as a tool in State policy. Despite civilian influence over operations and budgetary policy, politicians usually require the support of military decision-makers with technical knowledge (EP18, EP05, EP12, EP15). This has been stated in the theoretical approaches to civil-military relations, military advisors being necessary to guide civilian power (Nielsen, 1999; Rapp, 2015).

“The political level defines the operational frame and any missions assigned to its armed forces, but it also has to know the limitations, possibilities, and capabilities of the armed forces to assign them those missions. So I think that it is effectively a top-down process, by which I mean, from the political level to the military level or the military-strategic level and purely military level and in the opposite direction, too” (EP06, 2019).

“The political level is fundamental because it is the one which provides the frameworks. The Chiefs of Staff logically have a lot to say, but it's always according to that which is established by the political level” (EP07, 2019).

During ongoing military operations, military decisions could be constrained by political power, as civilians establish the acceptable limits of risk (EP10). This can imply that flexible leadership and command styles could lead to a transcending of conventional limits of risk and create

friction between politicians and the military (Ben-Shalom, Shamir, 2010). In contrast to other cases (Jordán, 2017), in Spain there is a low tendency to modify organisational military structures from the political level. The most remarkable case would be the creation of the Military Emergency Unit in 2005 as a result of the direct proposal of the then Prime Minister (López-Rodríguez, 2022b). Military participants remarked that due to its performance in health/natural crises, social perceptions to the military in Spain have substantially improved.

“As regards structures, I don’t think that politicians intervene in organisational structure issues. I can say that the most relevant case I’ve seen was the creation of the UME (...), which today could be the most accepted army unit. That’s because it works for the population. If there’s a flood, there is the UME. If there’s a fire, there is the UME. In that sense, it has provided us with a good perception of the army. That is because they are not firefighters, they are military” (EP18, 2019).

### ***Military Change During Political Uncertainty: Experimental Brigade 2035***

After identifying the areas of political influence, BRIEX 2035 was selected as a case study to test the applicability of the civil-military relations paradigm in Spain. As was previously mentioned, this change process seeks to transform the Spanish Army’s doctrine, structure, and procedures until 2035. The modernisation project has been implemented in coordination with Defense Industry companies such as General Dynamics or Indra, as well in cooperation with public Spanish Universities to design Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and high-tech weaponry (Blanco-Rodríguez, 2019). Within other technological elements, one of the most remarkable has been the inclusion of the new infantry vehicle *Dragon 8x8*, and, for the Spanish Defense Establishment, its manufacture by Spanish companies would be desirable. The relevance of BRIEX 2035 for civil-military relations is that it began during the last People’s Party government (2016–2018), continued by the Socialist Party (2018–2020), and maintained during the coalition government of the Socialist Party and Podemos (2020).

This transformation process involves two main military units; Training and Doctrine Command designed and developed the Future Land Operating environment since its conceptual phase (EP02, EP04), while some units of the Spanish Legion were selected to experiment with new procedures (EP02, EP09). One of the initial questions related to this research was the criteria that led to choosing the Spanish Legion as the experimental unit. It was not possible to obtain a definite answer to this question, as some of the participants in this study remarked upon the

impossibility to answer objectively due to an emotional bond with the unit, but indicating that maybe its organisational culture was the main reason (EP10, EP18).

In addition to modernising and increasing the efficiency of the Spanish Army, EP15 pointed that it also allows the Spanish Army to adapt to another kind of armed conflict. His contribution showed that NATO's armies had been focused on counterinsurgency, while other militaries had decided upon procedures regarding conventional conflict. Interviewees from the doctrine community and the Spanish Legion stated that it was a military initiative with approval from the political level (EP05, EP06, EP07, EP09, EP13, and EP15). Some of the participants declared directly that it was quite probable that the initiative originated from the Spanish Army's Chief of Staff (EP07, EP09, EP10, EP14, EP18), seeking to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their land forces.

“This change process of BRIEX 2035 has been promoted by the Spanish Army. Specifically by JEME, a.k.a. the General of the Army. He has been the fundamental engine of this process. Of course, he has the approval of the political authorities. The Defense Minister views it most favourably, and it is a process which is receiving the support of other superior levels of the Spanish Army from the Ministerial level” (EP09, 2019).

“I think that it is on both sides. Without efforts from both parties, nothing is possible. I mean, I think that, effectively, it is a military impulse, logically supported by politicians” (EP13, 2019).

“I think that it comes from the Army's Chief of Staff, he is the one who has promoted a future plan. Well, moreover, it defines what we have now, but also what we would like to have in the mid-term, right? Let's say, as regards the mid-term, twenty years from now” (EP18, 2019).

The analysis shows the relevance of military decision-makers in the planning, designing, and implementation of BRIEX 2035. According to theoretical paradigms, we can determine that is not fully in accordance with the explicative paradigm of civil-military relations, in which politicians decide the implementation of the change process (Posen, 1984). In contrast, it would be a military initiative from high, decision-making levels, more according to the military's top-down model (Rosen, 1991). In accordance with that which was stated by the interviewees during this research, it is a military initiative with political support. The initiative is in the frame of military competences, so it would not be a political initiative. It was relevant to determine the source of change, as it happened during a period of political alternation in government.

The selected case allows one to identify the influence of other theoretical explanations as regards the source of military change, seeing a tendency to emulate other armies (Horowitz, 2010), as was stated in other research about military change in Spain (López-Rodríguez, 2022a). This fact is present in the conceptual phase of the future land operating environment, in which the Spanish Army took an analysis developed by other countries including the UK, the US, Canada, France, and New Zealand as a reference (EP02, EP03, EP04, EP07). The process is conformed also by an effective system of lessons learned (Nagl, 2002; Davidson, 2010) on the conceptual level, but also in the later implementation phase. The Spanish Army's own lessons in international operations ease the correction of procedural and operative failures (Lopez-Rodríguez, 2022a). Finally, it would be too early to determine structural and doctrinal changes from the inclusion of new technology (Van Creveld, 1991). Despite the fact that one of the core elements is the inclusion of new technological and weapons systems, we cannot determine their influence over military change until they are tested in a combat environment.

## **Conclusions**

This research provides an additional study about civil-military relations in Spain. A historical analysis has been developed in two under-analysed periods from a civil-military relations perspective. However, this article presents limitations related to primary data production, especially during Primo de Rivera's and Franco's dictatorships. It has not been possible to obtain military perceptions from both periods, which could have been relevant in a comparison with current data. The Spanish Army has substantially changed during the last century, turning from a conscription-style army into an expeditionary force able to deploy overseas. In addition to its internal organisational dimension, the role of the Spanish Army in the political process and system has also substantially changed; it is currently an organisation which serves the State and the people.

This analysis evidences the evolution of military's role in Spain over the last century. The Spanish Army has changed from an independent actor with influence over the political process into an organisation which serves the State and Spanish society. Historical analysis identifies key points in its relations with the political sphere. Through data compilation, we can determine the degree of civilian influence over military change. Interviewees coincided on how politicians define general frames of operations, budgetary limits, and instructions related to the use of force. At the same time, and within the frame of its competences and budget,

are high-ranking, HQ-based, military personnel who design and define operational and tactical performances, being able to propose improvements to the political level.

In addition to it being stated in other research, political decision-makers require military support to implement organisational change. Despite its previous historical background, in Spain there is a balance between military and civilian power. Political decision-makers do not usually modify military structures and doctrine, it being the military responsible for such things within its competences. Taking BRIEX 2035 as a reference, the initiative continued between 2017 and 2021. In addition to its prevalence, participants in this study remarked that it was the brainchild of high-ranking military commanders, being explained by a top-down impulse.

Once the military's perspective about civil-military relations has been obtained, it would be relevant to incorporate a political or social perspective in the debate. Future lines of research could be developed around the civilian perspective of military change, both politically and socially. Social perceptions about military organisation in Spain is a field especially interesting to investigate, in an attempt to determine the degree of social acceptance, as well as whether the socio-demographic factor has any influence over them.

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