



REALISTIC

INTERNATIONALISM

When Two Worlds Collide

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ABSTRACT

“Domestic politics can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us,” U.S. president John F. Kennedy quipped shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Almost sixty years later, his words resonate on an international stage plagued with hostile tensions. Following a euphoric acceleration of economic growth and democratization in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution in 1991, the liberal world order has fallen short of the ideas of international cooperation and globalization with the rise of China and Russia. Some said internationalism was inevitable, yet illiberal ideas continue to advance, regardless of this unprecedented historical progress of humankind.



This current state of affairs is simply a continuation in the ongoing study of international relations and its two competing theories, liberal internationalism and realism. Each theory offers a perspective on the causes and possible solutions for war. Both realism and liberal internationalism have strengths and weaknesses in explaining certain circumstances in contemporary politics, while lacking answers to other phenomena. In an attempt to remedy these contentions, I propose a new grand strategy – realistic internationalism. This article will reveal the policy implications of this strategy as the United States moves forward in its attempt to navigate its international relations.

Kenneth Waltz's groundbreaking literature, "Man, the State, and War," outlines three "images" that reflect the causes of war. The "first image" is that human behavior causes war and that "men must be changed" to solve this dilemma.¹ Hans Morgenthau, the father of modern realism, extensively wrote on this cause in his work, "Politics Among Nations." According to him, "political realism believes that politics...is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature."² This pessimistic view, influenced by philosophers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, is realism's foundation. Human nature is self-interested, focused on advantage, and willing to use force all in the name of "self-preservation."³ In turn, war "results from selfish-

ness, from misdirected aggressive impulses, [and] from stupidity."⁴ Not only is this a image bleak, it is also fixed, as it is an objective universal truth. The threat of harm forces society to protect individuals from the 'lowest common denominator' – humanity's worst.

Does this mean war is inevitable, and peace is impossible? Yes, according to realists, who maintain that peace is impossible as war is the human condition. The goal of international politics is to recognize human self-interest and limit miscalculation to reduce instances of conflict. Nevertheless, when war occurs, it must be conducted to reach clear objectives while minimizing destruction. Although there will inevitably be bloodshed, politicians and diplomats must ensure that the state will survive. The question remains: can this mentality be used to explain the past two or three decades of relative peace?

The opposing theory of liberal internationalism sheds light on this question. Whereas realists believe humanity's tendency toward conflict is inevitable, liberals find that human nature is malleable. The minds of men are formed through education, where "individual goodness, if it could be universalized, would mean peace."⁵ There is hope for a warless future only if people are enlightened in liberal values. Humans can be trained to do good, to cooperate, and to flourish within a framework of values-based institutions. Classical liberalism reconciles with realist

self-interest in that “it is entirely in the individual’s self-interest to cooperate.”⁶ Peace is inherent in “liberalism’s ends [which] are life and property, and its means...liberty and toleration.”⁷

Moreover, liberal internationalists claim that rapid democratization after the Soviet Union’s collapse has engineered a more peaceful world. In Waltz’s analysis, this is the “second image,” where “the internal organization of states is key to understanding war and peace.”⁸ The most peaceful state systems, according to liberal internationalists, are liberal democracies. Evolving from the Enlightenment’s classical liberal thought, the argument for liberal democracy is that “the very vices of man contribute, indeed are essential, to the progress of society.”⁹ Liberalism harnesses the inherent selfishness in human individuals proposed by realists through structures in the state that balance them out. The protection of people and private property, justice, equality, and rule of law are all mechanisms that socialize and institutionalize this notion. In democracy, “interest and opinion combine to ensure a policy of peace,”¹⁰ thereby ensuring the best constitution for a state. Stephen Walt raises a realist counter argument claiming that this phenomenon reveals correlation and not causation, noting that “...the growth of international trade, communications, and currency (often lumped under the heading of globalization) has been underwritten by U.S. military power and backed by an exten-

sive array of alliance commitments and regulatory arrangements.”¹¹

There is no denying the fact that the United States’ overwhelming military might stabilizes regions throughout the world; however, it can be argued that the country’s alliance network results from the spread of democracy. The American triumph over illiberal communism signaled liberal democracy’s success to the rest of the globe. Therefore, the burden falls upon other countries to initiate the developmental process towards democratic government as it is in their interest of self-preservation to join the tidal wave of prosperity. G. John Ikenberry notes that the liberal order is influencing rising democracies such as Brazil, India, Mexico, and South Korea with considerable economic clout.¹² Consequently, this newfound “global middle class of democratic states has turned China and Russia into outliers – not...legitimate contestants for global leadership.”¹³ Clearly, this internal structural approach is popular among today’s scholars and policymakers. This view has been the U.S.’s grand strategy for over thirty years and its powerful argument solidifies liberal internationalism as a serious theoretical contender.

Neorealism, a branch of realism, offers the “third image” in Waltz’s book. He proposes that war is “a consequence of international anarchy”¹⁴ or the structure of the international order.



States are bodies of individuals who reflect human behavior, similar to the modern realist first image analysis. Waltz goes one step further to argue that “states in the world are like individuals in the state of nature.”¹⁵ Hobbesian philosophy is magnified on the international level, as nations act in their rational self-interest in a continual competitive state. Though the first and third perspectives are similar, international anarchy relies on a structural account of war rather than the normative and behavioral one presented by Morgenthau. The conclusion that can be drawn from this theory is that world government is the solution to international anarchy. . Similar to realists, neo-realists are skeptical of the feasibility of world government’s ability to achieve peace and prefer a balance of power politics to pur-

sue stability within anarchy. In contrast, third image liberal internationalists emphasize the importance of world institutions to achieve the semblance of global governance. More radical institutionalists want to change the very definition of state sovereignty as supranational world government.¹⁶

Without a doubt, institutionalism is a hallmark of liberal internationalism. Multilateral institutions are instrumental in today’s liberal world order. Institutions, treaties, and agreements, such as the United Nations, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the North American Free Trade Agreement arise when states realize they can “jointly benefit from cooperation.”¹⁷ Realism maintains that these institutions have minimal effect on international politics and



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are mere reflections of the great powers' will to legalize the existing system, protecting against threats to the status-quo.¹⁸ In the case of the United Nations, the U.N. Security Council is based on realist doctrine. World War II's victors - the United States, Great Britain, France, the former Soviet Union and current-day Russia, and China - control the organization's executive authority. Under the guise of the General Assembly's inclusionary 'one nation, one vote' constitution, the Security Council exercises indirect supremacy over international issues through its veto power. Any United Nations decision must garner the five great powers' stamp of approval, effectively turning this institution into a puppet manipulated by the world's strongest states.

Other realists contend that the United Nations is inherently flawed in its recognition that "states want to maintain their sovereignty."¹⁹ World government, which internationalists believe is the solution to conflict, cannot be sustained when states are sovereign, as sovereignty must be transferred to a higher authority. A union of nations is incompatible with this vision. Therefore, the only way to achieve such a radical system is to absolutely and fundamentally strip states of sovereignty in order to transform the United Nations so that it resembles its former self only by name.

Practically, the split between the political philosophies of realism and liberal international-

ism results in competing mechanisms attempting to remedy the problem of war. For realism, theorists depend on power politics and balance of power theory as the means by which states can attain their end of survival.

Classical realism states that "the concept of interest [is] defined in terms of power."²⁰ Power is controlling the minds and hearts of citizens, and the state's goal, as a mechanism of the individual, is to control the minds and hearts of other states through three instruments: "the expectation of benefits, the fear of disadvantages, and the respect of love for men or institutions."²¹ Each state either maintains power in a dominant position as a status-quo state, increases power in order to change the status-quo as an anti-status-quo or revisionist state, or demonstrates power in a policy of prestige.²² Thus, a leader's duty is to identify his or her state's interests and acquire the power to achieve them. Logically, this results in a relativity of power. If every state's goal is to attain power, absolute power is unachievable and only relative power can truly gauge how much power a country possesses. For example, it does not matter that nation "A" has five soldiers while nation "B" has four, however, it does matter that nation "A" has one more soldier than nation "B." Revisionist states seeking to acquire more power trigger status-quo states to maintain their dominance. This hinders peace treaties and international



law because cheating is an incentive for relative gains politics due to the states' competitive nature.²³ Recently, China has seized the free trade economic consensus in the liberal international order by implementing a monetary policy of currency manipulation, thereby gaining a competitive advantage on the backs of states that do not blatantly manipulate money.²⁴ This results in backlash towards free trade and a consequential retreat in the direction of protectionist policies. China upholds its own advancement at the cost of international norms, and other nations retaliate accordingly in an effort to keep up. In sum, realists believe that supranational cooperation is futile at worst and superficial at best.

The unfortunate result of relative gains power politics is the security dilemma. Relative gains analysis reveals that countries will never be content with their respective levels of power when others will try to gain the upper hand. States accumulate power voraciously in order to have the relative edge, no matter how exorbitant the pursuit of absolute power may become. Realists maintain that this situation is a necessary evil, noting that "building capability cannot guarantee security, but failing to do so can guarantee insecurity."²⁵ This can escalate to an arms race, most notably seen with the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II.

U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated after World War II's conclusion as Stalin's revisionist

ambitions pushed the Soviets to occupy Eastern and Central Europe while expanding further into Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The United States miscalculated Soviet ambition and failed to respond, allowing the Soviet Union to rise in power. After the Soviet Union successfully tested a nuclear weapon in 1949, the United States finally felt it necessary to respond to the impending Soviet threat. This security dilemma paved the way for nuclear deterrence theory, which combines "two competing goals: countering an enemy and avoiding war."²⁶ During the Eisenhower administration, the U.S. embraced deterrence theory by following a policy of brinkmanship. The goal of this strategy was to amass nuclear weaponry in order to escalate actions and threats until the enemy began to retreat. It was a game of 'chicken' with nuclear weapons. The sheer magnitude of the arms buildup was absurd, clearly illustrating the unsettling relations between states that can be imposed by the security dilemma. This classic case highlights the alarmingly tense world that realism depicts. Mutually assured destruction could have been unleashed by mere miscalculations.

Responding to the security dilemma, "liberal theories identify the instruments that states can use to achieve shared interests" through institutions.²⁷ When the security dilemma became a serious threat to the international community, a number of treaties ensured a reduction in ar-

maments during the Cold War. President Nixon's policy of détente allowed for bilateral dialogue through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (S.A.L.T.). S.A.L.T. I led to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty which limited strategic missile defenses.²⁸ When states create and follow international law and treaties, all states benefit from a de-escalated situation, where cooperation fosters mutual self-interested peace.

Understanding the polemical relationship between power relativity and competition, states practice balance of power politics to maintain their survival. Balance and equilibrium are natural universal truths, and they "maintain the stability of the system without destroying the multiplicity of the elements composing it."²⁹ The world's natural scarcity limits the accumulation of the elements of power. An individual state is limited to its resources within its sovereign borders, so that smaller states who see larger states as ambitious seek to balance power with the help of others. In a multistate world, balance provides an atmosphere in which all states can survive. However, this multipolarity poses risks because "dangers are diffused, responsibilities unclear, and definitions of vital interests easily obscured."³⁰ Many actors increase the chance for one actor to miscalculate and lead the rest to stumble into war. For instance, the European great powers prior to World War I deeply entangled themselves in an alliance system which

included the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. These strategic alliances were unstable due to each player's variable intentions. In the days leading up to the war, this intense mistrust ensured that Russia would not back down against Germany and thus World War I began.

In light of these strategic failures, Waltz concludes that a bipolar system is better for maintaining the balance of power. He claims that the "rigidity of alignment in a two-power world results in more flexibility of strategy and greater freedom of decision."³¹ The clearly-defined structure between two superpowers causes fewer miscalculations. When missteps occur, they are dealt with swiftly as the focus is on only one adversary. They cannot be concealed or overlooked, which is more likely to occur in a multipolar situation. Tension would be ever-present, but war could be avoided. Instead of having to balance many different sized blocks, it is easier to balance two large, but equivalent, blocks on a scale. Such a theory explains why the Cold War never turned hot.

Unlike realists, liberal internationalists rely on democratic peace theory, just war theory, and humanitarianism to explain today's more peaceful disposition and the progression to Kantian 'perpetual peace.' As U.S. president Bill Clinton said in his 1994 State of the Union address, "Democracies don't attack each other." Democratic peace theory is based on



Rousseau and Kant's optimistic beliefs which are in opposition to the pessimistic foundation of realism. Liberal values and human rights are universal truths because humans are an end in themselves. Democratic peace theory proposes that "when liberals run the government, relations with fellow democracies are harmonious;" thus, democratization is essential because its structure executes liberal ideals. Popular sovereignty in a democratic system is naturally conflict-averse, so public opinion contributes to a more diplomatic approach in international affairs.³² John Owen emphasizes that immature democracies with illiberal leaders pose threats because they are incompatible with liberal democracies.³³ Mature democracies, which include the likes of the United States and western Europe, are torch-bearers of democratic peace and must lead the international community into a new world order of institutionalized cooperation, thereby paving the way for progress. According to liberal internationalists, realists fail to recognize "that ideas matter in international relations, both as shapers of national interest and as builders of democratic institutions."³⁴

Consequently, international norms guide actors towards institutions, and institutions legislate and enforce international norms, which creates a circular dynamic that cements democratic values. For example, popular elections are an international norm that even illiberal states

and dictatorships emulate. Revisionist authoritarian Vladimir Putin recently won re-election to a fourth term of the Russian presidency under false pretense amid forced voting and ballot stuffing.³⁵ Human rights and humanitarian intervention have clear underpinnings of international mores and values. Because certain human rights have been normalized in the liberal international order, certain obligations are expected of powerful states to safeguard against "war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and genocide when national governments fail to do so."³⁶ New doctrines such as "the 'responsibility to protect,' which holds that the international community has a special set of responsibilities to protect civilians – "by force, if necessary" – encourages democratic forces to fight wars as the protectors of humanity, transcending borders.³⁷ Nonetheless, this paradigm shift occurred only after the Soviet Union's fall, when the United States' liberal international order became a unipolar hegemony.

Further, just war theory incorporates humanitarian intervention and regime change as methods to forcibly democratize nations, thereby helping to form a cooperative world network. Just war theory contends that a state's "aggressiveness... [and] murderousness... makes a political regime a legitimate candidate for forcible transformation."³⁸ The role of the state is to protect its citizens, and if a state is

purposefully undermining this principle through the systematic killing of its population or minority groups, it forfeits its sovereignty and invites foreign intervention to dispose of the tyrannical government. Just war must first overthrow the despotic regime, and only after this task is achieved should the democratizing forces focus on changing institutions and state building. This type of war warrants the “forcible and justifiable democratization—and that will sometimes require an attack on traditional hierarchies and customary practices” that may cause pushback from the people being saved.³⁹ Internationalists view this tumult as small steps backwards in the push towards progress. When history is regarded as a linear progression, such difficulties add to the building blocks for peace. To these optimists, hope resides in the fact that “history is on the side of the angels.”⁴⁰ This positivity does not bode well with realist theory, which focuses on the concept of universal truths that are immutable in nature. In this scenario, just war condones Western liberal imperialism. In this vein of thought, humanitarian intervention is delusionary and will often backfire, therefore risking a state’s own power.

Paradoxically, humanitarianism often calls for killing people in order to save people from being killed. “Even if the ends of such actions could be unambiguously humanitarian,” Benjamin Valentino argues, “the means never

are. Using force to save lives usually involves taking lives, including innocent ones.”⁴¹ Developed countries risk lives in foreign entanglements in the name of human rights, yet encounter opposition from the locals the countries they intend to save. Rival factions seize on this itch to attack liberal democracies through antagonizing the current regime, baiting the government to injure them in order to paint it as a war crime, as what happened in the 2011 Libyan intervention.⁴² This trick prolongs conflict and cultivates the conditions for small factions to seize power and institute their own regime, which may harbor murderous intentions as well. This moral hazard “encourages the excessively risky or fraudulent behavior of rebellion by members of groups that are vulnerable to genocidal retaliation.”⁴³ More concerning, though, is that these newly emboldened rebel groups “cannot fully protect against the backlash.”⁴⁴ Humanitarian intervention is antithetical to the realist belief that a state’s sovereignty is sacred. States, no matter what kind of constitution, must preserve themselves in the anarchical international order. When a foreign state intentionally invades or intervenes in another state, that state has a right to fight back, and it will. If a “self-help” system has been established, states will resort to any means for self-preservation, including genocides and ethnic cleansings.⁴⁵ Even if the sovereign is ‘bad,’ ignoring sovereignty invites invasion



and imperialism. The state has no morally objective laws and must not be concerned with such, or else that state falls into an ideological trap. Therefore, pushback in these countries should be expected when unnecessary exorbitant foreign power and bloodshed breeds resentment and retaliation.

Sadly, humanitarian intervention cautiously treads the line between being a benevolent obligation to humankind and being an imperialistic tendency by the dominant powers, which in this case are liberal democracies. The failure of the United States intervention in Somalia's civil war sparked public outrage and forced then-president Bill Clinton to withdraw military personnel. On the other end of the spectrum, the Rwandan genocide and the United Nations' failure to effectively respond to such widespread killing questioned Western liberalism's credibility and resolve to enforce their 'universal' values.⁴⁶ Later on, the Bosnian crisis proved a turning point, as humanitarianism had its first successful instance of protecting civilians and preventing ethnic cleansing.⁴⁷ Quick, strategic intervention stabilized the region while ensuring leaders were held accountable for crimes against humanity. Liberals claim they have discovered the recipe for forcible humanitarianism, but each circumstance has intricate nuances in rationale, culture, norms, and politics, making such a generalization too overarching and invalid. Ultimately, the Pan-

dora's box of humanitarianism negates any of its potential holiness.

Both realism and liberal internationalism have clear merits to their argument. In crafting policy, however, politicians must moderate their views on either theory, and should strive to find a middle ground through 'realistic internationalism,' in which realist principles drive internationalist goals. Through this balance, the United States can maintain its predominant political clout, while ensuring its ideas are implemented in a realism-based plan.

A United States grand policy of realistic internationalism has four goals. First, the sanctity of sovereignty must be preserved, which implies that humanitarian intervention and regime change are unjustifiable causes for the U.S. to go to war. Second, liberal democracies are intrinsically more peaceful than other forms of government, and the United States must push forward with liberalism to foster further democratization without the use of force. Third, since institutions are key to reduce mistrust, diffuse tension, and promote cooperation, the U.S. must maintain all its treaties and alliances and establish hard red-lines to back those up. Fourth, the United States must hone in on its vital interests and restrain its influence as a great balancer in secondary spheres of interest.

The first new American principle is that states have an inalienable right to sovereignty,

no matter what constitution. The nation is “the supreme authority” that is “free to manage its internal and external affairs according to its discretion...”⁴⁸ Thus, any direct humanitarian intervention and regime change is unjustifiable. The detrimental consequences outweigh the benefits, and artificial democratization at the point of a gun is unsustainable and politically counter-productive.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the United States can indirectly aid impoverished countries through resources and economic means. Though this method may also have its downsides, the U.S. can flex its soft power on developing countries and plant the seeds for a liberal economy, an essential foundation of liberal democracy. Preventative measures such as public health programs and disaster-relief efforts reduce the risk of instability, ultimately stopping future atrocities.⁵⁰ Thus, the U.S. must restrain interventionist urges, provide conditions conducive to natural democratization, and opt for a prudent exercise of force.

Another principle is that liberal democracies are inherently more peaceful than illiberal, non-democratic states. Political and economic conditions align so that these specific values and structures promote prosperity over conflict. Thus, more democracies in the world will lead to less war, but not the elimination of it. This realist principle must be the foundation for any claims for peace, as the anarchical order will most likely not create world government.⁵¹ Short of world

government, this outlook says that democracies, with their shared norms, will naturally gravitate towards one another. Realistically, “forward progress on this agenda will need to come voluntarily...rather than as a result of some top-down edict from a supposedly authoritative body or actor.”⁵² In keeping states sovereign, states choosing to democratize will also opt to cooperate in a symbiotic relationship that would further the semblance of stability in anarchy. Regime change, though, is not an option. Forcible democratization is risky, as retaliation may mean the complete upheaval of the liberal order. Blunders in foreign policy have resulted in a more volatile international system, casting doubt on the liberal hegemonic order. Sovereignty must be respected, but democracy must flourish.

Additionally, institutions are beneficial for all states who partake in them, as they provide information, increase dialogue, and promote common norms. When war is a result of human miscalculation, institutions reduce this risk when open forums provide transparency in foreign affairs.⁵³ The United Nations is the hallmark of the liberal world order, and the U.S. must defend its premise when it is used as a forum for dialogue. On the other hand, the United Nations cannot transform to the likes of the European Union, therefore, the United States should emphasize individual states’ sovereignty. The United States should also emphasize



the benefits of keeping the separated structure of the United Nations in which the U.N. Security Council's power ensures its executive control over force. Moreover, instead of shying away from international treaties such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Agreement, the United States must uphold these commitments to maintain credibility and avoid hypocrisy.⁵⁴ Simply put, the United States cannot go at it alone in the age of globalization, because the rise of transnational terrorist organizations forces nations to "use soft power to develop networks and build institutions to address shared threats and challenges."⁵⁵

In considering the role of international cooperation in nuclear theory, there are no relative gains when there is the potential for absolute annihilation. The U.S. must lead the pack and embark on multilateral nuclear deals and treaties to reduce arms and stop any further nuclear proliferation, for "as the number of nuclear powers increases, the probability of illicit transfers, irrational decisions, accidents, and unforeseen crises goes up."⁵⁶ American policymakers should consider steps to reduce the stockpile mutually with other states, especially when modern-day "deterrence doesn't require a lot of nuclear weapons."⁵⁷ If rogue states dare to weaponize nuclear energy, the United States must use swift and decisive military force to uphold the international norms of non-proliferation.

While American vital interests must be prioritized, a more restrained policy is ideal for secondary interests such as Middle East security. The current U.S. primary interests are Western Europe and East Asia. In this respect, American commitment, personnel, and presence will continue to provide security for allies in a defensive posture. Russia and China, as the present adversaries to the liberal world order, pose imperialistic risks to American allies. Sustaining the current military presence signals the United States' resolve to protect against their aggression. To limit Russian or Chinese balancing against the U.S., "the United States' principal aim...should be to maintain the regional balance of power so that the most powerful state in each region...remains too worried about its neighbors to roam into the Western Hemisphere."⁵⁸

In the Middle East, the United States cannot entangle itself in civil unrest and other internal affairs, in line with the aforementioned principle of sovereignty. Barry Posen paints this restrained American stance as follows: "the United States should help protect states in the region against external attacks, but it cannot take responsibility for defending them against internal dissent."⁵⁹ Middle Eastern balancing is integral to regional stability. Artificially propping up one side hurts the American image, which means the further loss of prestige at a

time when the U.S. cannot afford more popular anti-American rhetoric from these countries. Withdrawing the American military presence will readjust the Middle East scale and foster an advantageous balance of power politics. Keeping these nations divided halts any regional unification and hegemonic behavior, and if a state exhibits anti-status-quo intentions, the U.S. could tip the scale to the other side. Overextending American might will lead to the acceleration of the United States' recent decline, and only restraint will halt it.

War is the struggle for peace. This indelible reality rings true in the annals of history, both past and present. In international relations, these innate complexities breed innovative solutions and eye-opening perspectives to world consciousness. While realism's focus on the undeniable role of power and liberal internationalism's focus on the success of democratic, ideals-driven institutions seem rigid in theoretical work, these two views are more of a spectrum or mixture in American politics. Pragmatically, any hardline approach to these theories will receive harsh criticism from either side. It is imperative, then, to soften the edges and compromise to create a practical U.S. grand strategy of realistic internationalism. With the latest developments in the world, the United States must adapt to the stark realities this declining superpower is facing methodically, not impulsively. After careful analysis,

the four key principles outlined balance sovereignty and power politics with institutionalism and indirect humanitarian aid to create the 'third way' in international relations. This new policy reflects the United States' identity as an innovator, and guarantees that, as Abraham Lincoln proclaimed, "the government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."



ENDNOTES

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