

# Revisiting the 'Conflict Trap': Assessing the Potential Resurgence of an Armed Struggle in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract-** *Five years on since the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Sri Lanka is in transition. Having experienced a protracted war for nearly three decades, the country has shifted to a post-conflict nation-building phase following the successful conclusion of the Humanitarian Operations. While post-war peace is often taken for granted, the global experiences witness a relapse of war within a few years of the conclusion of violent conflicts. This phenomenon is stipulated by the 'conflict trap' theory. That is, post-conflict societies run a high risk of sliding back into armed conflict within five years after the conclusion of a war.*

*Notably, the island nation has not witnessed a single terrorist attack since the decimation of the terror outfit, and any attempts to revive the armed struggle have been successfully thwarted thus far. To this end, the Sri Lankan case defies both the 'conflict trap' concept and the conventional experiences of many post-conflict nations around the world. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to test the applicability of the theory to the Sri Lankan context. This requires assessing the potential relapse of a large-scale violent arms struggle in the island nation within the conceptual framework. The research purports that a resurgence of hybrid warfare and a terrorist outfit like that of the LTTE is highly unlikely in the current socio-political climate in the country.*

**Keywords:** conflict trap, post-conflict Sri Lanka

## I. INTRODUCTION

Five years on since the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Sri Lanka is in transition. Having experienced a protracted war for nearly three decades, the country has shifted to a post-conflict nation-building phase following the successful conclusion of the Humanitarian Operations. While post-war peace is often taken for

granted, the global experiences witness a relapse of war within a few years of the conclusion of violent conflicts. This phenomenon is stipulated by the 'conflict trap' theory. That is, post-conflict societies run a high risk of sliding back into armed conflict within five years after the conclusion of a war. The socio-political environment of a post-conflict society is as such that it is conducive to the revival of violence. Moreover, terrorist outfits that were military defeated tend to revive and unleash a wave of terrorist attacks after a respite.

In the case of Sri Lanka however, the island nation has not witnessed a single terrorist attack since the decimation of the terror outfit and the demise of the LTTE chieftain Velupillai Prabhakaran. Although there have been continuous reports on the arrest of LTTE operatives and the recovery of weapons within and outside of the island nation, any attempts to revive the armed struggle altogether have been successfully thwarted thus far. To this end, the Sri Lankan case defies both the 'conflict trap' theory and the conventional experiences of many post-conflict nations around the world. What explains this phenomenon, and is the 'conflict trap' theory relevant to the Sri Lankan context at all?

While series of literature have examined the 'conflict trap' theory in different war-torn societies around the world, the concept is yet to be explored with the Sri Lankan case. Five years since peace has dawned in the island, it is both timely and imperative to revisit the 'conflict trap' and test its applicability to Sri Lanka. This paper seeks to assess the potential relapse of a large-scale violent arms struggle. The research purports that a resurgence of hybrid warfare and terrorism of the scale of the LTTE is highly unlikely in the current socio-political climate in the country.

The article starts with providing a theoretical framework of the research by defining the concept and illustrating the experiences of other post-

conflict societies around the world. This will help identify where Sri Lanka stands within the global perspective. Thereafter, the paper goes to analyse the applicability of the theory to the Sri Lankan scenario. Based on this, the paper goes to conduct a threat analysis by examining the following: 1) whether the post-2009 LTTE elements possess the necessary conditions to conduct terrorist attacks and 2) recent incidents that suggest the potential resurgence of violence in the post-war period. The following section offers some analytical insight to the relapse of conflict in the Sri Lankan context. Lastly, it draws some conclusion about the overall research finding and offers future threat assessment. Lessons learned from this study may refine the existing knowledge on the 'conflict trap' theory, as well as shed some light to the relevant stakeholders of Sri Lanka's national security. This study relies on qualitative data extrapolated from open sources secondary sources.

## II. CONFLICT TRAP: THEORY AND GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

Conflict is common to all societies and countries, and history has witnessed ample amount of conflicts which were fuelled by various reasons. While numerous internal conflicts have been brought to an end through different methods, not all conflict resolution efforts have remained a success. Some countries continue to remain war-torn in the long run as a result of temporary peace followed by a relapse of conflict. In fact, societies that have experienced one civil war are significantly more likely to repeat second and third wars than countries that have not experienced any conflict in the recent history (Walter, 2004). Of the 103 countries which experienced conflict since 1945-2009 (range of minor and major conflicts), 59 countries subsequently returned to conflict (Walter, 2010). This begs the question, what makes a country or a society vulnerable to the relapse of violence in the post-conflict phase? Why do some countries experience recurring conflict while others do not?

Some scholars attribute the recurring conflict to the following: a) 'original grievances' which fuelled the initial conflict had not been resolved; b) violence exacerbated ethnic division, thus making coexistence a challenge; c) war ended in a unsettled or unsatisfactory compromise, or d) human costs of the conflict created psychological barriers to

establish peace in the post-conflict phase (Licklider, 1995; Doyle & Sambanis, 2000; Hartzell, Hoddie and Rothchild, 2001 cited in Walter 2004). Civil wars fought based on identity (language, ethnicity, religion) are likely to recur over time because the conflict cements the differences and the hatred between the belligerents. The repeated conflicts in the Balkans, and between the Tutsi and Hutu in Africa, Jews and Arabs in the Middle East are some notable examples. Furthermore, Kalyvas (cited in Walter, 2004) purports that vengeance is a primary motive for individuals to return to violence.

Conversely, Walter argues that the key determinants for the relapse of conflict are economic and political incentives for ordinary citizens to take up arms again to engage in a violent movement. In other words, countries of those citizens who enjoy high level of economic wellbeing and have access to a more open political system is less likely to return to conflict again as compared to autocratic countries with low levels of individual welfare (2004). Thus, she focuses her study on the macro-level issues to explain the 'conflict trap'. Her findings also indicate that longer and more costly wars reduced the likelihood of the relapse of violence.

In his work entitled *The Bottom Billion*, Paul Collier (2007) broadly identifies four 'traps' which have prevented developing nations from emerging to higher standards of living. Of the four, he identifies what is called the 'conflict trap'. The study contends that developing countries remain poor because they are continuously trapped in an endless cycle of violent conflicts. He outlines the four main causes of relapse of violence: 1) societies with stagnant low-income economies; 2) substantial numbers of alienated uneducated young population who are potential recruits of an armed group; 3) in countries that depend on commodity exports, much of their economy is concentrated within segment of a population that control the business and monopolize the profit. As a result, much of the wealth generated is not trickled down to the majority of the population. Further, international buyers tend to back the players with most resources. Thus, if militants yield more economic outcome, international buyers may support the militancy for their economic gains.

To this end, Collier observes that Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of countries that are caught

in the conflict trap. In fact, 35% of the recurring conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been in the particular area (Walter, 2010). Collier attributes this to the weak economic growth of the respective countries: “I do not want to claim that only economy matters, but without [economic] growth peace is considerably more difficult” (2007). This argument is underpinned by the Indonesian case. Aceh’s secessionist rebel group known as GAM faced challenges to recruit members between 1976 and 1989 due to the increased income levels and the GDP of the country (Ross 2003 cited in Walter, 2004). Therefore, as individual economic status improves, the incentive to fight tends to wear down, even if grievances and animosity remain to a certain extent.

Theoretically, the manner in which a war comes to an end also affects the chances of conflict resurgence. There are opposing views on the impact of decisive military victory vis-à-vis the relapse of violence. On the one hand, Walter (2004) contends that wars that end in a decisive military victory for one side is less likely to face a resurgence of violence, for either one of the two reasons. First, the overwhelming victory of one side may deter potential militants to take on the ‘stronger’ adversary. Second, in civil wars, the victor gains full control of the state, thus allowing itself to consolidate its power in the aftermath of the war. Consequently, this significantly undermines the opportunity and the intent of potential adversary to regroup and fight again. Few historical examples demonstrate how the strong government campaigns have succeeded in crushing the militants. For instance, the Tupamaros of Uruguay (an ultra-leftist urban guerrilla group) which was active in the 1960s was heavy-handedly crushed by 1972, never to see a resurgence of their activities. It is logistically difficult for movements to sustain their campaign when significant numbers of their members are killed by government forces, and serves as an effective deterrent against future would-be fighters to take up arms.

On the other hand, military action can be temporarily successful. We have witnessed a series of repeated confrontation for instance in Chechnya with the First Chechen War (December 1994-August 1996) and Second Chechen War (August 1999- April 2009) as well as the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict with the First Intifada (December 1987-September 1993) and the Second Intifada

(September 2000- September 2005). Both conflicts repeatedly continue to date, following a respite of violent confrontation between the belligerents. The Kurdistan’s Workers’ Party (PKK)- active since 1984- is another case in point. Although the Turkish government forces successfully crushed the long-running PKK campaign by 1999, the movement spread to the broader region with the advent of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and catalysed the resurgence of violence. While military victory is seemingly successful in the immediate aftermath, it may not be adequate to eradicate the conflict in the long run because military actions increase the motivational basis to engage in violence against the perceived occupational power (Beyer, 2012).

Given the existing theoretical assumptions on the conflict trap and the resurgence of violence, Sri Lanka is at a critical juncture. The island witnessed a protracted conflict based on ethnic identity, and the conflict came to an end through the military victory of the government forces. The country is currently undergoing rapid development in the aftermath of the war. Five years on since the defeat of the LTTE, it is imperative to examine the relevance and the applicability of the ‘conflict trap’ to the Sri Lankan context in order to assess the national security landscape of the island nation. To this end, the following section will conduct a post-war threat analysis and the potential resurgence of violence in Sri Lanka.

### III. POST-WAR THREAT

This section will assess whether the post-Prabhakaran LTTE possesses the necessary conditions and capabilities to revive its terrorist activities in Sri Lanka.

While the country has not witnessed a single terrorist attack on its soil since the military defeat of the terrorist outfit, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse has clearly expressed the revival of the LTTE activities as a primary national security concern for the country. He rightly argues that the source of threat emanates from the pro-LTTE Diaspora groups abroad that continues to achieve secessionist objectives by adopting three broad strategies: 1) Increasing international pressure on Sri Lanka by pushing for an international investigation on war crimes; 2) Undermining all government efforts to create a better future through reconciliation and economic development

for its citizens; and 3) Continuing to push for the resumption of conflict through re-organising local pro-LTTE elements in Sri Lanka (2013). There are several factors which underpin the above contention.

In order to assess the potential revival of the LTTE, it is imperative to first examine the conditions which could possibly allow the terrorist activities to resume. The risk assessment of the post-2009 LTTE has been conducted in 2013 through the use of 'Adversary Threat Matrix' (De Silva, 2014). Here, the author examined the intent, capability, and the opportunity for a revival of LTTE terrorism in Sri Lanka. The study concludes that the intent (purpose and will to engage in violence) at the domestic level and opportunity (environment conducive for the terrorists to conduct attacks) are minimal, while capability (operational tools and logistics to conduct attacks) remains to be a key strength today (ibid).

In the aftermath of the humanitarian operations, the violent Eelamist ideology of the former LTTE cadres has been significantly de-radicalised and neutralised, due in part to the much successful multi-faceted rehabilitation programme orchestrated by the Sri Lankan security forces. However, the extremist ideology has not been fully neutralised at the external front, namely the pro-LTTE Diaspora. In the post-war context, there has been an increasing trend in pro-LTTE political activism in the West. The operational space of Tamil separatism has shifted outside of the Sri Lankan soil, and the small segment of the Tamil Diaspora communities is persistent on continuing the legacy and the Eelamist ideology in different manifestations. Pro-LTTE groups such as the notorious Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), Global Tamil Forum (GTF), Tamil Coordinating Committee (TCC), and the LTTE Headquarter Group are organisations that are active today, in pursuit of a separate state in the island nation. Their strategy and tactics are diverse. To name a few, anti-Sri Lanka propaganda (including management of websites), political lobbying to Western governments and international organisations, operation of the *Thamilcholai* Schools in Europe. These activities certainly reflect that the 'intent' among the pro-LTTE Diaspora communities for a separate Eelam still prevails.

In terms of capability, reports indicate that Nediyanwan's TCC based in Norway has control over

most of the assets of the LTTE's international front organisations, numerous income-generating activities in the West which were set up during the wartime continue to date (see De Silva, 2014). Criminal activities have also continued as a lucrative business in the post-Prabhakaran era, including human smuggling (MV Ocean Lady and MV Sun Sea), as well as drug-trafficking (Nathaniel, 2014).

In terms of weaponry, the security forces have continuously recovered large hauls of LTTE weapons following the conclusion of the humanitarian operations. In a recent news report, the Indian police force recovered hand grenades and landmines imprinted with an LTTE logo in Salem district, Tamil Nadu (Times of India, 2014a). Given the level of the Tigers' weapons procurement activities over the years, it is likely that more arms are yet to be recovered from different parts of the island, as well as in India. Overall, the pro-LTTE elements possess more than adequate funding and weaponry to revive a violent struggle in the country.

While the Eelamists possess ample intent and operational capability to revive its activities on Sri Lankan soil, what they significantly lack is the 'opportunity'. The opportunity to conduct terrorist attacks in the country was significantly eliminated with the conclusion of humanitarian operations. The Sri Lankan security forces have been able to prevent attacks thus far by denying the militants to revive its activities. In the post-May 2009 setting, the Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse has articulated the importance of strengthening the internal security as part of a larger National Security Strategy (Ministry of Defence, 2013). He asserted the need to enhance the capabilities, resources and coordination between the different intelligence agencies that operate in the country. Moreover, he has given primacy to an unobtrusive military presence in the strategic locations throughout Sri Lanka, particularly in the North and East to maintain vigilance at all times. This move is indeed paramount to ward off the efforts of external elements to reorganise the pro-LTTE entities in the country. Relapse of conflict would only occur when the perpetrators of violence are able to circumvent and exploit existing loopholes within the national security framework.

The following section will examine the significant developments that recently prevailed both internally and externally of Sri Lanka, which brings

the possibility of a resurgence of an armed conflict under scrutiny.

#### IV. RECENT INCIDENTS

Of the many recent arrests and incidents involving the LTTE operatives, below are the three significant developments (presented in chronological order) which suggest a potential resurgence of conflict in Sri Lanka.

A. Arrest of Nandagopan: In April 2014, Subramaniam Kapilan *alias* Nandagopan was arrested by the Sri Lankan Terrorism Investigation Department (TID) in Malaysia. He is believed to be the second in command of the Nediyan faction in Norway, although his operations were based mainly in Malaysia. There, he attempted to resuscitate the terrorist outfit through engaging in propaganda activities of the LTTE ideology abroad (Weerasinghe, 2014). This arrest was considered a groundbreaking success for the law enforcement agencies in Sri Lanka in an overall attempt to thwart overseas LTTE activities, and to have captured the deputy of Nediyan Faction.

B. Shootout at Nedunkerni: On April 10<sup>th</sup> 2014, three former LTTE members- Gopi, Appan, and Thevian- were killed following a confrontation with the security forces in the jungle in Nedunkerni, Vavuniya. The shootout occurred when the trio attempted to flee from the cordoned area in the jungles. In the aftermath of the incident, the TID recovered mortars, hand grenades, claymore bombs and ammunitions for T56 weapons which were in the possession of these individuals (Colombo Gazette, 2014). Interestingly, the trio is said to have been receiving instructions from Nediyan in Norway and Vinayagam in France, to prepare the ground for another armed struggle (Sunday Times, 2014). To this end, the immediate objectives of this group included the recovery of weapons, re-establishment of the domestic intelligence network, espionage and reconnaissance activities, as well as recruitment of local youths among those who underwent the government's rehabilitation programme as future cadres (*ibid*). The funds for their activities allegedly came from Europe through the Hawala money transfer system, and the trio purchased safe houses and vehicles as well (*ibid*). In essence, much of the groundwork for the revival of the LTTE movement in the country

had been initiated by the trio with the assistance of the foreign LTTE network.

The significance of this incident is two-fold: One, it was the first ever clash witnessed between the state forces and the militants in the post-May 2009 setting. Furthermore, this incident reinforced the speculation of the potential revival of the conflict in the near future. Second, this incident marked a strategic and tactical victory for the defence establishment for successfully thwarting a potential terrorist activity, thereby preventing a trigger event which could have possibly led to the relapse of a conflict in the island.

C Arrests of LTTE activists in Malaysia: In May and July this year, three and four LTTE activists were arrested respectively, in an attempt to revive the LTTE movement internationally. The trio arrested in May were registered UNHCR refugees, and were in possession of LTTE propaganda materials, media equipment as well as foreign currencies from 24 nations. They were suspected of using Malaysia as a base of Eelam propaganda and generating funds for their activities (Times of India, 2014b). Reports indicate that the arrest came following the debriefing of Nandagopan (Ministry of External Affairs, 2014). Subsequently, the four detained in July were believed to be senior members of the LTTE- one suspected to be linked to the failed assassination attempt against President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1999, second a explosive expert, third allegedly facilitated the attacks against Sri Lankan consulate in India, and the fourth accused of espionage and reconnaissance for the group (Reuters, 2014). Again, it was claimed that these men were attempting to exploit Malaysia as a transit, shelter and centre for their operations. In the wake of these arrests, the Malaysian authorities expressed their rising anxiety that the LTTE is attempting to sow the seeds of Tamil separatism in Malaysia, as well as exploit the country as a launching pad to execute attacks against Sri Lanka (Ministry of External Affairs, 2014).

#### V. ANALYSIS

The three aforementioned cases clearly underscore that the pro-LTTE Diasporas are continuing to push for the resumption of conflict in Sri Lanka, through a two-pronged strategy. Externally, they continue to sustain and intensify the 'intent' among pro-LTTE Tamil Diaspora to engage in secessionist activities in

their respective host countries. The 'capability' to revive the conflict in the Sri Lankan soil is also being nurtured. The LTTE rump continues to recuperate by sustaining its fundraising and propaganda operations internationally. Domestically, the Gopi incident revealed that the LTTE international network is responsible for directing and assembling cadres within Sri Lanka to revive the movement. Subsequently, local elements under the auspices of the international LTTE groups, attempt to recruit local youths and retrieve hauls of ammunitions and weapon caches which were hidden by LTTE prior to its decimation. In this regard, there are ample reasons to be alarmed of the potential resurgence of terrorist activities on Sri Lankan soil.

Having said that, one crucial component lacks for Sri Lanka to fall back into conflict thus far. That is, the security environment. As portrayed in the earlier section, the Sri Lankan defence establishment- along with the invaluable assistance of foreign law enforcement agencies- continues to successfully apprehend individuals concerned and foil potential resurgence of LTTE activities. While the arrests of the activists in Malaysia is merely a tip of an iceberg in terms of the number of LTTE operatives abroad, the shootout at Nedunkerni indicates that potential LTTE attacks and activities in the domestic theatre can be thwarted with effective intelligence and the close coordination of the security forces. In fact, as far as the security environment of Sri Lanka is concerned, there is hardly any space for the militants to revive terrorist activities in the island due to the effective national intelligence network and sustained vigilance of the defence establishment. Therefore, albeit the untiring efforts of the LTTE operatives abroad to revive the conflict, the opportunity for terrorism to raise its ugly head in the country has been denied altogether.

There are other pertinent points as to why Sri Lanka is unlikely to fall into the conflict trap in the immediate future. Based on the global experiences and the conflict trap theory, the Sri Lankan case defies the hypotheses that the ethnic conflict along with a war that was militarily defeated is likely to revive. First of all, it is crucial to understand that those who insist on the resurgence of conflict in Sri Lanka are different from those who will actually take up arms to fight. In other words, while it is predominantly the pro-LTTE Diaspora groups that still insist of an Eelam, they themselves will not enter and remain in Sri Lanka as a cadre. As we

witnessed since 1980s to 2009, the operational scope of the pro-LTTE Diaspora members is outside of Sri Lankan territory. It is the local Tamil youth who has been, and will continue to be the victims of the long-lost Eelam dream. To date, the LTTE operatives abroad merely provide logistical support to revive the conflict, while depending on the local Tamil youths to physically revive the movement. This was clearly demonstrated with the shootout in April 2014. The question is whether the LTTE operatives abroad have the capability to engender local public support and mobilise the domestic Tamil constituencies.

Against this backdrop, it is crucial to assess whether the local Tamil population possesses the will to physically assist the pro-LTTE Diaspora's efforts in a large scale, to resume the conflict. As pointed out earlier, the rehabilitation programme of the ex-combatants has been commended as an overall success, and the terrorist recidivism rate of the beneficiaries have been none so far. The most vulnerable recruits are those who have managed to evade the rehabilitation process (including the Gopi-Appan-Theviyan trio), and those who find the relapse of conflict as an attractive alternative to peace. As Paul Collier purports, it is important to ensure that the country does not produce potential recruits of an armed conflict. In other words, local youths must not feel alienated from the society (socio-economically and politically) so that they are not attracted and mobilised by the Eelamist rhetoric abroad.

So far, there seems to be a severe disconnect between the ambitions of the LTTE rump abroad and the aspirations of the general local Tamil population. For instance, it has been reported that Gopi's suspicious activities had been tipped off to the authorities by several peace-loving Tamils in the area, which ultimately led to the search operations and the subsequent confrontation in April. Moreover, former Indian Peacekeeping Forces Intelligence Corps Head Colonel R. Hariharan expresses: "I doubt whether any Sri Lankan Tamil seriously believes Tamil Eelam is achievable...I think Tamil people are too weary of war to entertain such notion. They have lost too much for too long" (Mohan, 2014). Such rejection of violence and of the Eelam ideology at the grass root level is another factor which is protecting the island from slipping back to a violent conflict in the present context.

From an economic and political point of view, Sri Lanka is currently far from a low-income economy. It has undergone rapid development and solid infrastructure is being built in the war-torn areas. The Northern Provincial Council is now functioning, and the avenue for a political participation of the local population has gradually opened up. Having said that, Sri Lanka is still at the initial stage of the post-war phase, and there are still issues which the state needs to address and redress accordingly in order to achieve a genuine long-term socio-economic and political integration of the Tamil people.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

In conclusion, Sri Lanka has defied the conflict trap theory so far because the country has not slipped back to conflict after five years. The fact that a conflict based on ethnic identity was brought to an end by military means makes a country vulnerable to the relapse of violence. Furthermore, the original grievances have not entirely been redressed yet, and the overseas pro-LTTE activists have intensified its Eelamist agendas in the post-2009 scenario. Despite this, Sri Lanka has not witnessed a resurgence of conflict. This can be attributed to several factors, but primarily due to the strengthened national intelligence network and the failure of the LTTE rump abroad to mobilise the local Tamil population to once again take up arms to fight against the state. The operational capability and the passionate support of the pro-LTTE Diaspora groups exist outside of Sri Lankan territory; however, the security environment as well as the mobilisation of the local Tamil population hardly exists in Sri Lanka at the moment. Thus, relapse of a violent arms struggle within the country is an unlikely scenario in the immediate future, despite the untiring efforts of the overseas LTTE elements.

Based on the conflict trap theory, the key to preventing a conflict relapse in Sri Lanka is the extent to which the state is successful in the following: redressing the grievances which led to the conflict in the first place; adequate economic and political incentives for the local Tamil population; and neutralising vengeance and violent ideology. Re-integration and meaningful reconciliation through community engagement is thus critical in ensuring that an environment

conducive to a relapse of violence is denied to elements that benefits from the 'conflict trap'.

Additionally, the overseas remnants lack a dynamic leader who can replace Prabhakaran. For a mass social movement to operate successfully, the ideology needs to be mobilised through a robust leadership. Because Prabhakaran's demi-God like character is still freshly embedded into the minds of most pro-LTTE elements, the potential successor of Prabhakaran is likely to face a challenge in 'outdoing' Prabhakaran as a leader. Moreover, the successful rebirth of the LTTE would likely be more potent and destructive than the former, as the new outfit would have learned some lessons from the past strategic and tactical blunders of Prabhakaran's LTTE. As a result, the organisational behaviour, strategic and tactical preference of the new outfit may completely divorce from the past. Perhaps, the new face of terrorism that could potentially confront Sri Lanka in the future will take on a separate path from that of Prabhakaran's Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam.



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