

India's policy towards Israel: Paradigm Shift or Continuity

Dr.Madhusudhan.B

Asst. Professor , Dept. of Political Science, N.S.S Hindu College Changanacherry, Kerala (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 25 May 2019

Keywords

Palestine, Modi government, NDA regime, defence relations, West Asia, Jerusalem.

Corresponding Author

Email:madhunsscollege[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Indo- Israel relations have always been shaped on the basis of India's traditional policy on Arab cause particularly the Palestinian issue. Even after India had made formal diplomatic ties with Israel in the 1990s, the traditional policy parameters resumed. This particular pattern of maintaining relations with Israel had even continued during NDA regimes under Vajpayee when the BJP had vowed strong ties with Israel in the context of increased security threats and other reasons in the South Asia and West Asia. However, after assuming power Prime Minister Narendra Modi has started viewing vigorously the various possibilities of Indo-Israel relations. There are signs of a policy shift under Modi's regime. The article argues that a perceived vigorous policy shift is manifested in the Indian-Israeli relations in the back drop of new government in India.

1. Introduction

In 1992, India recognised Israel, consequent to that both the countries had opened up embassies in their own countries. In this context, Indo-Israel bilateral relationship has assumed new forms and manifestations. Ever since the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel, the India-Israeli trajectory of relations has been in the nature of ups and downs. Though the relationship had been proactive, the dialogues and deliberations between the countries had not been in high profile. This had been on account of the significance of the national interests that India wanted to uphold especially the Arab interests. At that time, both the Palestine and the Arab cause were still considered to be one of the prime policy concerns of India. However, the Narendra Modi government has redefined the bi-lateral relations with Israel. Modi government has made a departure from even the earlier BJP governments of looking at Israel without any kind of emotional attachment to Palestine and Arab cause.

2. Trajectory of India-Israel relations in the 1990's

In fact, the two erstwhile British colonies of India and Israel have shared some common features as newly sovereign states, as they both dealt with difficult partition and both emerged as stable democracies in a volatile arena (Blarel, 2012, 155). Despite the uniformity of interests and aspirations, there had not been serious attempt to rejuvenate the relationship between the two countries until 1992 when India had established diplomatic ties with Israel. The political changes in the world in the 1990s had redefined India's foreign policy priorities and engagements with Israel. Developments at the regional level in the beginning of 1990s had also prompted India to revitalise its relations with Israel. In the early 1990s several peace initiatives were undertaken to resolve the Arab-Israeli issue including Madrid Conference negotiations and Oslo accord which created an opportunity for India to have an active engagement with Israel and to reassess a pro-Arab posture. The mainstream political parties India had also favoured a pro-Israeli posture and the BJP leadership's vivid statements in favour of maintaining engagements with Israel were a clear manifestation in this regard. Pramod Mahajan had even argued that Pakistan and China had occupied sizable

territory of India, yet we had maintained diplomatic relationship with our neighbouring countries (Statesman,1991). If one can attribute the normalisation of bilateral relations with the Israel to the Congress policy in 1992, the BJP government had considered Israel as a logical and natural partner as it shared the same concern about terrorism (Blarel,2012,168).Both the countries have experiences in dealing with terrorism in their border issues with the Palestine and Kashmir (Blarel,2012,168). Hindu nationalists have also supported and accepted the highly extremist nature of Israeli society and the attitude of their leaders in using force against Palestinians. In this context, the BJP has always given importance in fortifying relations with Israel and has always been critical of the Congress' pro-Arab leanings.

3. Responses from the Arab and the Muslim World

The Arab and Muslim responses to the enhanced Indo-Israel interactions in the 1990s was of great importance in the context of India's traditional amity towards Arab states. Analogous to the pro-Israeli postures, India was keen on preserving its amicable relations with most of the Arab states. India's West Asian policy had historically been moulded by three important priorities. The first being the Gulf States were one of the major sources of India's oil requirements. The Second factor is that India had a large number of emigrants in West Asia who remit solid remittances in India. Therefore, India has traditionally been perturbed about their welfare. Third factor is that India had always sought the support of Arab-Muslim states pertaining to its disputes with Pakistan.

Against this background, the Narasimha Rao Government had taken certain initiatives to restore confidence among the Arab states for a possible setback as a result of diplomatic restoration with Israel. The diplomatic efforts on the part of India were focused on to instill confidence among Arab nations. And as part of that effort a series of initiatives were taken in the ministerial level. The then Prime Minister Rao had invited the responses and reactions of Arab nations pertaining to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel (Blarel, 2015, 277). The then Foreign Secretary, J.N Dixit, opines that many of the Arab diplomats were critical of the establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel and cautioned that India had to

encounter severe consequences (Blarel, 2015, 277). Dixit reciprocated that India would not accept 'extraneous limitations on its sovereign right of determining its policy decision within the framework of Indian interests' (Dixit, 1996, pp. 312-13). The responses from Dixit reveal the fact that India did not want to lose the benefits emanating from the restored ties with Israel. India was less inclined to have smooth relations with Arab nations owing to the direct and indirect advantages emerged out of proactive ties with Israel.

The reactions of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) were also significant in the sense that it had often brought out critical statements with regard to India's actions in Kashmir. In twenty-first session of the OIC in Karachi in 1993, a resolution was passed condemning the human rights violations in Kashmir which according to them were at par with similar kinds of violations in Palestine, Bosnia, and South Africa. The resolution had also insisted on compelling India to accord permission to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination (Times of India, 27 April 1993). However, some of the Arab states particularly Saudi Arabia was keen on developing its ties with India on account of emerging power status of India.

At the domestic arena as well, the Muslim community was more concerned about Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 than the pro-Israeli posture of India. In this context of low profile responses from Arab and Muslim world both in the domestic as well as external realm, India had started thinking about closer relations with Israel focusing on defence interactions. India was much interested in developing defence ties with Israel on account of two reasons.

First, India, in the process of becoming self-sufficient in military industry was eager to have closer military ties with Israel as it had tremendous experience in developing a largely indigenous and self-sufficient military-industrial complex capable of competing with Western powers (Blarel, 2015, 279). It was also beneficial to have tie-ups with Israel in the military sector as Israeli expertise by way of technological advancement is reflected in aspects of their social life. A Pakistan Defence analyst contends that India-Israel drip irrigation tie-ups provide a "a good cover" for defence cooperation in mechanised warfare and military exercise in desert terrain in which Israeli army has attained great skill (Arif, 1993). The second factor which can be attributed to growing India-Israel defence engagements was the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 which had created a vacuum in supplying arms to India. Israel had been found to be a reliable partner in defence tie-ups.

In curbing the menace of terrorism as well, India had sought the help of Israel. The then Defence Minister Sharad Pawar stated that India would try to build on Israel's experience in specific technology for anti-terrorist operations (The Times of India, 22 February 1992). Since 1992, several defence tie-ups with Israel have been made in clandestine manner. These include exchange of visits by Defence officials, visits of Israeli delegation of armed manufacturers to India, delegation from the Malat Company of Israel to offer Cruise Missile Technology etc. (Gerberg, 2008, 363). A crucial movement on the part of India in defence engagements was in

the last phase of 1990s when the Kargil border tussle had terminated and the Indian Ministry of Defence had signed a five year contract for delivering 100 tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV's) and 200 UAV's for high and low altitude operations (Gerberg, 2008, 367).

In countering terrorism also, both the countries cooperated in a big way. India has evinced enormous interest in Israel's internal security technology, equipment and methods to counter border terrorism in Kashmir and the insurgencies in North-Eastern states (Kumar, 2001, 07).

By the middle of 1990s, economic relations between the two countries had significantly enhanced. The economic cooperation between the two countries had evolved into two different levels. The first level of interaction was in the arena of joint ventures between Israeli and Indian companies. The joint ventures were concentrated on irrigation, water management, fertilizers, greenhouses etc. At the second level, the cooperation had focused on directly signed agreements with state governments in India. The Indian states which mostly utilise the Israeli direct agreements were Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Haryana.

4. India's Israel Policy in the last phase of 1990's and 2000

It was in this context of steady and augmenting alliance between India and Israel that the BJP had assumed power in 1998. Many scholars contended that the bilateral relations with Israel had gained momentum under the BJP regime. These observers argued that the BJP had initiated a more unapologetic foreign policy towards Israel, which was less inhibited by the concerns of earlier governments about Arab and domestic reactions (Blarel, 2015, p.292). There was also an element of anti-Muslim perception in the BJP's attitude towards Israel. Prasad observes that when the BJP-led NDA was in power 1999 and 2004, many attributed India's growing proximity with Israel to the anti-Muslim agenda of the *hindutva* elements (Cited in Kumaraswamy, 2015, p.546).

The controversy loomed over the question of India's engagements with Israel on 'nuclear cooperation and Islamic fundamentalism' (Sreekantan Nair, 2004, 195). In the year 2000, L.K Advani, the then Home Minister, firmly supported and increased nuclear cooperation with Israel as well as joint action against "Islamic Terrorism" (The Hindu, 2000). In response to Advani's statement on nuclear relationship between India and Israel, the Arab diplomats had met in the third week of June, 2000 in which they resolved to seek clarification from India's foreign secretary. The diplomats were also apprehensive about the comments made by Jaswanth Singh the then External Affairs Minister regarding India-Israeli relations. During a speech in the Indian Council of Foreign Relations in Jerusalem on July 2, 2000, Jaswanth Singh stated that the failure on the part of India to move closer to Israel earlier was owing to a "very strong urge among politicians to continue in office" and this is on account of the fact that "India's Israel policy became a captive to domestic policy that came to be unwittingly an unstated veto to India's larger West Asian policy" (Varadarajan, 2005). These remarks from the political leadership evoked criticisms from the Arab League. The League strongly protested and accused India and Israel of

building to develop nuclear ties and warned of consequences from Arab world (Sreekantan Nair, 2004, 196).

However, in spite of the growing tendency of Indo-Israeli rapprochements in the 1990's, India's traditional attitude towards Arab question particularly on Palestine issue did not undergo substantial transformation. India's solidarity to the Palestine question was manifested by her reaction in supporting to convene an international conference to enforce Geneva Convention and to protect the rights of Palestine people in the occupied territories including Jerusalem (Sreekantan Nair, 2004, 201). India also agreed to provide 51 training slots to the Palestine personnel for specialised training (Foreign Affairs Record, Annual Report, 56).

These policy priorities have consistently been maintained by both the Congress and non- Congress Governments at the Centre. However, when the BJP Government came to power in the latter part of 1990's and early 2000 at the centre, Indo-Israeli relations gained momentum and additional fillip. L.K Advani and Jaswanth Singh became the first Home Minister and External Affairs Minister ever to visit Israel. Their diplomatic journey and controversial statements bear testimony to the proactive ties with Israel. It was significant to perceive the reactions of Indian and Israeli leaderships to cross-border terrorism during the visits of Indian leaders L. K Advani and Jaswant Singh to Israel. Authorities from both the countries were anxious about the cross-border terrorism and vowed to carry out intelligence sharing on Islamic extremism. The BJP also revealed a keen interest in Israel's stringent legislation directed against elements that assist in financing, incitement, family support, or state support of terrorists. (Martin Sherman and M.L Sondhi, 1999). As Jaffrelot argues that ultimately, the BJP regime also demanded the formation of a triangular forum comprised of the US, India, and Israel to combat a similar terrorist threat (Cited in Nicolas Blarel, 2012, 169). Stephen Blank observes that the Indian government firmly believed that Israeli defence expertise and its experience of 'zero-tolerance' legislation could help them in preventing future terrorist threats and thus promote a crucial expansion of military trade between the two countries after 1998, concluding deals with billions of dollars, such as the purchase of the Israeli airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) Phalcon systems in 2003 (Cited in Nicolas Barel, 2012, 169). Despite these activities, even the BJP regime did not like much change in the traditional path adopted by earlier governments on the question of Palestine.

However, the kind of harmonisation and strengthening of relations between India and Israel during regime of NDA Government in 1998-2004 in its various phases had been challenged by the formation of UPA government under the leadership of INC (Indian National Congress). Even in the Common Minimum Programme of the UPA coalition, there were references to drastic changes in the West Asian policy particularly a reassertion of India's support for Palestine cause. The differences between the BJP's posture and to those of UPA were the more proactive role played by the UPA government in addressing the Palestine cause. Parallel to the driving defence cooperation and to a fast developing commercial relationship, the post 2004 government also took

strong pro-Palestine, if not anti-Israel, positions in most multilateral platforms.

5. Modi Regime and Policy towards Israel and Palestine

Since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, foreign policy has assumed great significance and momentum. Three issues have occupied a crucial place in the foreign policy agenda of Modi. These issues are tough line in national security, acceleration of India's neo-liberal reforms, and promotion of cultural nationalism (Birvadker, 2016, 86-87). These policy perspectives have called for a vibrant West-Asian policy particularly to Israel and Palestinian issue. The more vibrant and exhilarated policy posture towards to Israel on account of previous BJP Governments which had openly invited cooperation with Tel Aviv, as well as from pro-Israel statements made during his campaign. (Ghitis, 2014; Gupta, 2014). The Indo-Israeli engagements have reached new proportions and trajectories. Close interactions are manifested in a plethora of areas including security concerns, diplomatic visits, change in public perception and patterns of voting in the UN (Birvadker, 2016, 87). In September, 2014, Modi and his Israeli counterpart deliberated up on the Iranian nuclear programme and prospects of Indo-Israeli relations at a UN General Assembly session. The Indian President Pranab Mukherjee had made a visit to Israel in October, 2015. This was considered to be historical and a major milestone in the Indo-Israeli relations. This was the first visit ever made by an Indian President to Israel. The Ministry of External Affairs has brought out various agreements which had been reached at Amman, Ramallah and Jerusalem. An analysis of these agreements revealed the fact that "a new template of its engagement with Israel" (Kumaraswamy, 2015, pp1-8, ORF issue brief No.119). A focus on his visit to West Asia discerns that some of his statements seemed to have influenced by the earlier positions that India had taken on Palestine and Israel, a closer perception was in tune with changed circumstances. This is particularly true in his pronouncements during his visit to Israel. The three observations he had made were really significant.

One was that, India's relations with Israel was moving in an excellent direction and declared that India's consistent policy has been to build strong, substantive and mutually beneficial relations with Israel. (Kumaraswamy, 2015, pp1-8, ORF issue brief No.119). He continues that 'India remembers with gratitude, the help provided in rushing critical defence supplies to India when we needed them most urgently in 1999' (Kumaraswamy, 2015, pp1-8, ORF issue brief No.119). No such open comment on the direct military help from Israel has emanated from an Indian leadership so far.

Another significant observation that President Mukharjee had made was the common political culture that India and Israel share- a vibrant democracy. In his opinion 'despite the two countries separated by sea, we believe in diversity and democracy'. The most controversial pronouncements he had made in Israel was the colonial legacy of both India and Israel. This was in contrast to the earlier position that India had taken in responding to Jewish nationalism and Zionism (Kumaraswamy, 2015, pp1-8, ORF issue brief No.119). Since the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the Indian leaders had

severely criticised the Israeli demand for a separate state perceived from an anti-imperialist prism (Kumaraswamy, 2015, pp1-8, ORF issue brief No.119).

The UN has become an arena of showing strong pro-Palestine and anti-Israeli protests ever since India started diplomatic ties with Israel. However, India's response and reactions towards the Israeli encroachments at Gaza was lacklustre and lukewarm. In order to pacify the situation, India took a positive attitude towards the Palestine cause by voting in favour of forming a special investigation committee for the Gaza Strip under the UN Human Rights Council. India ultimately declared that it was expressing concern about the raising violence between Israel and Palestine (Birvadker, 2016, 87). The situation underwent drastic changes when India abstained in a vote on the UN report on condemning Israel for Operation Protective Edge along with four countries-Ethiopia, Kenya, Paraguay, and Macedonia in July 2014. Haaretz reported that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself pleaded Modi, Ethiopian Prime Minister and Kenyan President to abstain from UN voting against Israel (ndtv.). The Palestine response to the issue was of great apprehension and the shift of Indian policy was, it declared, on account of military relationship between Israel and India (Khalid Saif, 2015). Even though, India assured that there was no change in Indian policy towards Palestine, the abstention move was considered to be a drastic shift in Indian policy towards Israel and Palestine.

Another noticeable development in the Indo-Israeli relations is the visit of the President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin to India in 2016 after a long gap of 19 years. Mr. Rivlin was accompanied by a sufficient number of business delegates. The Israeli delegation led by Rivlin signed more than 20 education tie-up agreements. According to a statement by Rivlin 'Indo-Israeli relations is not just a strategic or economic partnerships, but a partnership which is making a difference for Israelis and Indians in the water we drink, in the food we eat, in the technology we use and many important areas of our lives' (Bhattacharjee, 2016). It is also significant to note another statement by Israeli President that 'Terror is terror whoever carries it out and whoever are its victims. And we all have the duty to condemn in our words, and fight with our deeds against the terrible evil' (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The Indian Prime Minister reciprocated that there was a need for joint understanding to resist such threats that pose a challenge to peaceful development.

6. Narendra Modi's Visit to Israel

Modi's visit to Israel in July, 2017 is significant in many ways. The most crucial aspect being he is the first Prime Minister of India to visit Israel. Apart from the enhanced relations in the arena of agriculture, security and defence cooperation plays an important role in emerging India-Israeli ties. Israel has emerged as a significant factor in India's Grand Strategic calculation under Modi (Gupta, 2017). Modi's visit to Israel has been debated vigorously in the sense that in a clear cut departure from the past Indian policy, Modi had avoided visiting Ramallah, the de facto capital of Palestine Authority (PA). He did not even remark the Palestine issue openly during his visit to Israel. In a joint statement by Israel and India, it was reaffirmed that 'the need for establishment of a just and durable peace in the region' and pledged 'support for an early

negotiated solution between the sides based on mutual recognition and security arrangements' and avoided terms like 'two state solution' and made no mention of East Jerusalem as Palestine's future capital (Gupta, 2017). This particular strategy from Modi is attributed to the fact that India-Israeli relations are not dependent on Palestine factor. As part of the strategy in West Asia, India does not incline to be influenced by a "third party" consideration. Days before his visit to Israel Modi had hosted a reception to Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas in New Delhi in which Modi reiterated India's support for a "Sovereign, independent, united, and viable Palestine, coexisting peacefully with Israel" (Kumaraswamy, 2017, p.4).

7. Benjamin Netanyahu in India

Even before Netanyahu's visit to India, Modi and Netanyahu met at UN General Assembly and Netanyahu remarked the limitless possibilities of India-Israel relations. Since then, there had been a series of high level visits and engagements with India including Israeli defence minister, Moshe Ya'alon's visit to India in 2015. Netanyahu in his first visit to India in January, 2018 has agreed cooperation in several areas including agriculture, science and technology and security. In the defence sector, it was agreed that Israeli companies could make advantage of the new Indian liberalised FDI regime. The Netanyahu visit to India has raised many questions regarding the nature of foreign policy postures of India in the changed circumstances. In a joint statement between India and Israel on January, 10 2018, both the leaders share a common vision for the relationship. They convinced that in the next twenty five years the two respective countries should strive to raise bilateral cooperation in diverse sectors to a qualitatively new level in consonance with our strategic partnership (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Apart from the renewed interests in trade and other sectors, the visit also realised the grave danger of terrorism. The joint statement reiterated that 'there can be no justification for acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever and advocated strong measures against terrorists, terror organisations, those who sponsor, encourage or finance terrorism or provide sanctuary to terrorists and terror groups' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018).

It is also significant in this context to perceive that even in the context of further strengthening its relations with Israel, India had also augmented its ties with United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Iran in West Asia and Iran in particular has had no smooth relations with Israel. Indian commitment to Arab particularly the Palestine cause was evident in a UN General Assembly Resolution rejecting US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. 128 countries voted in favour of General Assembly Resolution including India and this was just prior to Netanyahu's visit to India. Netanyahu responded that, 'even though Jewish state was "disappointed" by India's vote at the UN against the Jerusalem issue, one negative vote will not affect the ties' (Times of India, 2018).

8. Defence tie-ups

Israel's Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon visited India in February, 2015. Ya'alon's visit assumed significance as this would be the first time that an Israeli Defence Minister is visiting India since formal diplomatic ties were established in January 1992 (Rajiv, 2015).

Various Israeli cabinet ministers had visited India, including, among others, those holding the Finance, Interior, Tourism, and Agriculture portfolios (Rajiv, 2015). India is estimated to have purchased over \$10 billion worth of defence equipment from Israel (Rajiv, 2015). In addition, India and Israel are engaged in jointly developing long-range surface-to-air missiles (LRSAM) for the IN and medium-range SAM (MRSAM) for the IAF (Rajiv, 2015). Both projects were gaining traction and were in the process of completion in the 2015-16 timeframe. During Ya'alon's visit, reports noted that contracts would be made for additional AWACS aircraft and aerostat radars worth over \$1.5 billion (Rajiv, 2015).

Prior to Ya'alon's visit to India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's brief interaction with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in September 2014 at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York had focused on defence tie-ups between the heads of government since 1992. Both leaders committed to take the defence relationship further, along with expanding cooperation in other fields like cyber security, water management, agriculture and solid waste management (Rajiv, 2015). It is significant to note that this interaction came close on the heels of Israeli military action 'Operation Protective Edge' during July-August 2014 that led to the death of over 2000 Palestinians (Rajiv, 2015).

After Modi's meeting with his Israeli counterpart; Home Minister Rajnath Singh visited Israel in November 2014. During his meeting with Netanyahu, Singh emphasised the significance of 'capacity-building and training' in the arena of homeland security, on which both sides had reached an agreement (Rajiv, 2015).

Modi's and Singh's interactions with Netanyahu demonstrate that the BJP has always been a votary of stronger ties between India and Israel and its leaders have time and again (especially while in the opposition) expressed appreciation of the Israeli government's muscular anti-terrorism and national security policies (Rajiv, 2015). The Modi government came to office pronouncing to adopt a more stringent position on national security issues. It has further stressed that the defence procurement processes would be

expedited to meet the pressing modernisation and upgrade requirements of the armed forces.

The defence cooperation between the two countries has also been significant in the context of the menace of terrorism. Both the nations encounter terrorism emanating from beyond their borders. The nature and form of terror outfits which pose a threat to both Israel and India are less similar in nature. Modi's and Netanyahu's rendezvous with ten year old Moshe Holtzberg, whose parents had been killed in Mumbai terror attack, was part of the recognition of grave threat of terrorism. Israel identified that there is no difference between Lashkar-e-Taiba and Hamas (Gupta, 2017). In a Joint Statement, during Modi's visit, it was mentioned that both countries should focus on joint development of defence products, including the transfer of technology from Israel that would give boost to Make in India initiative (Gupta, 2017).

9. Conclusion

Ever since, India initiated diplomatic connections with Israel, India has been following an ambivalent position on issues pertaining to Israel and Palestinian cause. Despite the ups and downs in the policy towards Israel, India apparently supported the Palestine issue. However, during BJP regime both the countries had escalated their interactions in a proactive way. Even during Vajpayee's administration, India did not seem to have given up a pro-Palestinian posture along with hectic Indo-Israeli engagements. The Modi's regime perceived to have consistent policy perception towards Israel. President Pranab Mukherjee's statements and Indian abstention together with four countries in a UN voting condemning Israel have been a clear indication of that changing pattern of Indo-Israeli relations. The new BJP government has realised that an increased interaction with Israel would strengthen its policy priorities on national security. Enhanced defence tie-ups demonstrate the fact that Modi desires to have close connections with Jewish state. Events at the international arena seemed to have certain repercussions on Indo-Israeli engagements. India is emerging and is part of the so called BRICS groupings. A meaningful South-South cooperation always warrants tie-ups with West Asia especially Israel which has to offer substantial aid in agricultural sector. The new regime and its policies and changing world scenario would determine the future course of Indo-Israeli relations.

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