

“Transnational Repression” and U.S. Policy: In Brief

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Background

Foreign government-supported “transnational repression” has been of increasing concern to some U.S. policymakers in the past several years. It is broadly viewed as a human rights issue as well as a form of foreign interference affecting individuals and communities in countries around the world, including in democracies such as the United States.

Definitions and Manifestations. The nongovernmental organization Freedom House, which beginning in 2021 has helped popularize transnational repression as a foreign policy concept of possible concern, has defined it as “governments reaching across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles, including through assassinations, illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, Interpol abuse, and family intimidation.”¹ The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has similarly described transnational repression as referring to “a range of tactics that foreign governments employ to reach beyond their borders to harm, intimidate, threaten, harass, or coerce individuals,” with targeted victims “often includ[ing] political dissidents and activists, journalists, political opponents, religious and ethnic minority groups, and members of diaspora and exile communities.”² The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) states that “transnational repression denotes acts conducted or directed by a State, or its proxy, to deter, silence or punish dissent, criticism or human rights advocacy towards it, expressed from outside its territory.”³ Some debate exists about what the scope of transnational repression entails, such as whether it should refer only to cases in which a victim has a national connection to the repressing government, or whether it should encompass a broader set of cases.⁴

Transnational repression practices often appear to be associated with authoritarian governments seeking to overcome an “illiberal paradox” in which transnational political activism by overseas communities risks destabilizing regimes that may at the same time broadly rely on emigration for economic or other reasons (e.g., remittances).⁵ Freedom House has generally divided manifestations of transnational repression into the following broad categories:

- direct attacks by origin states against individuals abroad, including assassination, assault, physical intimidation, abduction, and unexplained disappearance;
- the co-optation of actors or institutions in other countries to subject a target to detention, rendition, or unlawful deportation, including through alleged abuse of International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) systems;⁶
- mobility controls, such as passport revocations or the denial of consular services, which prevent targets from traveling or cause them to be detained; and

¹ Freedom House, “Transnational Repression,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>. Freedom House to date has produced the most comprehensive data on transnational repression as a global phenomenon; this report therefore draws substantially on Freedom House’s research.

² Department of Justice (DOJ), “Transnational Repression,” <https://www.justice.gov/nsd/transnational-repression-tnr>.

³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Transnational Repression,” June 18, 2025.

⁴ See discussion in Nate Schenkkan et al., “Perpetrators and Methods of Transnational Repression and Possible Counter Strategies,” European Parliament, January 2026.

⁵ Gerasimos Tsourapas, “Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics,” *International Studies Review*, vol. 23, no. 3 (September 2021), pp. 616-644.

⁶ According to Freedom House’s data covering incidents up to 2024, more than half of the documented incidents of physical transnational repression were facilitated by cooperation between governments, with “host governments”—including some democracies—having “acted on politically motivated Interpol notices, granted questionable extradition requests, and allowed perpetrators to kidnap and remove individuals from their territories.” Freedom House, “Ten Findings from Ten Years of Data on Transnational Repression,” February 6, 2025.

- long-distance threats, such as online intimidation and surveillance or “coercion by proxy” through threats to family members or other individuals associated with the target who remain in their country of origin.

An additional category of increasing concern for some observers is the abuse of tools intended to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism to restrict a target’s access to financial services (referred to by some as “financial transnational repression”).⁷

In addition to potentially violating the human rights (e.g., rights to life, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement) of direct targets, the use of transnational repression tactics may more broadly serve to engender fear and self-censorship among other members of targeted overseas communities.

Examples of Alleged Incidents of Transnational Repression

Some prominent examples of alleged incidents of transnational repression since 2020 include

- Iranian government plots dating back to 2020 to kidnap or kill an Iranian-American dissident in New York;⁸
- alleged connections between the Indian government and two assassination plots in 2023 targeting Indian Sikhs in Canada and the United States;⁹ and
- the February 2025 forced return of 40 Uyghur asylum seekers from Thailand to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in potential breach of Thailand’s human rights treaty obligations.¹⁰

Prevalence. The prevalence of transnational repression appears to have increased in the 21st century due to a variety of factors, including increased global migration and the proliferation of digital communications and surveillance tools. The U.S. Intelligence Community’s (IC’s) 2024 *Annual Threat Assessment* report stated, “Foreign states are advancing digital and physical means to repress individual critics and diaspora communities abroad, including in the United States, to limit their influence over domestic publics.... Digital technologies have become a core component of many governments’ repressive toolkits even as they continue to engage in physical acts of transnational repression, including assassinations, abductions, abuse of arrest warrants and familial intimidation.”¹¹ The same report assessed that governments “are likely to exploit new and more intrusive technologies—including generative [artificial intelligence]—for transnational repression,” and noted that at least 74 countries between 2011 and 2023 “contracted with private companies to obtain commercial spyware.” The IC’s 2025 and 2026 annual threat assessments do not discuss transnational repression.

⁷ Schenkkan et al., “Perpetrators and Methods of Transnational Repression and Possible Counter Strategies,” European Parliament, January 2026, pp. 16-17.

⁸ DOJ, “Justice Department Announces Murder-For-Hire Charges Against Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Brigadier General and Former Intelligence Officer and Members of an Iranian Intelligence Network,” October 22, 2024; DOJ, “Two Russian Mob Leaders Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison for Murder-For-Hire Targeting a Journalist on Behalf of the Iranian Government,” October 30, 2025.

⁹ CRS Report R47597, *India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress*; Prime Minister of Canada, “Statement by the Prime Minister on the Ongoing Investigation on Violent Criminal Activity Linked to the Government of India,” October 14, 2024; DOJ, “Justice Department Announces Charges Against Indian Government Employee in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City,” October 17, 2024; DOJ, “Indian National Pleads Guilty To Plotting To Assassinate U.S. Citizen In New York City,” February 13, 2026.

¹⁰ See discussion in Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), *2025 Annual Report*, December 2025, p. 261; OHCHR, “UN Human Rights Chief Deeply Troubled by Thailand’s Deportation of Uyghurs to China,” February 27, 2025.

¹¹ Office for the Director of National Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” February 4, 2024.

The State Department, in its annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* covering 2024 (the most recent such reports published), describes reports of transnational repression in relation to 51 governments.¹² More expansively, Freedom House has cataloged a total of 1,375 “incidents of physical, direct transnational repression”¹³ allegedly committed by 54 governments between 2014 and 2025 in more than 100 countries.¹⁴ According to Freedom House’s data, 10 “origin state” governments were responsible for over 70% of these incidents: the PRC (319 incidents), Turkey (160), Russia (100), Tajikistan (94), Egypt (62), Turkmenistan (60), Cambodia (56), Iran (51), Uzbekistan (51), and Belarus (46).¹⁵ Data shortcomings, such as the likelihood that many cases do not become publicly known, suggest that the actual number of cases may be greater. Nonphysical tactics of transnational repression, such as long-distance threats, are also difficult to quantify and are not tallied by Freedom House at the level of individual cases.

Selected U.S. Government Responses

Public Reports. The State Department began including information on transnational repression in its annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* starting with the reports covering 2019. In December 2023, Congress enacted a provision mandating specific reporting on acts of transnational repression within these annual reports.¹⁶ Congress also has required some separate reporting on the misuse of INTERPOL communications (see “Enacted Legislation” below).

Law Enforcement Actions. U.S. federal prosecutors have brought a variety of criminal charges (e.g., relating to bribery, interstate harassment or stalking, kidnapping or murder conspiracy, and acting as an illegal foreign agent) against individuals who may have been involved in forms of transnational repression against persons in the United States.¹⁷ Since February 2022, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has maintained a transnational repression information page on its website, which notes how incidents can be reported.¹⁸ DOJ has engaged in some multilateral coordination with pertinent intelligence and law enforcement officials from partner governments to address transnational repression.¹⁹

¹² The governments include Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burma, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Guatemala, Guinea, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Nicaragua, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, and Vietnam. The reports’ descriptions of the nature and extent of these governments’ involvement in transnational repression vary (e.g., some governments are described only as having cooperated to facilitate other governments’ acts of transnational repression).

¹³ Including assassinations, assaults, detentions, renditions, unlawful deportations, and unexplained disappearances.

¹⁴ Yana Gorokhovskaia and Grady Vaughan, “Collaboration and Resistance: Tracking Transnational Repression in 2025,” Freedom House, April 2026.

¹⁵ Gorokhovskaia and Vaughan, “Collaboration and Resistance: Tracking Transnational Repression in 2025,” April 2026.

¹⁶ 22 U.S.C. §2151n(d)(13).

¹⁷ See, for example, DOJ press releases cited above, and links to additional releases accessible at <https://www.justice.gov/nsd/recent-cases-and-related-press-releases> and <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/transnational-repression>.

¹⁸ See <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/transnational-repression>. <https://www.justice.gov/nsd/recent-cases-and-related-press-releases>

¹⁹ DOJ, “Joint Statement of the U.S. Department of Justice and the United Kingdom Home Office on a Multilateral Meeting to Address State-Sponsored High-Harm Physical Threats and Other Forms of Transnational Repression,” October 30, 2024.

Targeted Financial Sanctions and Visa Restrictions. The United States has imposed some sanctions in response to particular incidents of transnational repression. For instance, the Treasury Department has sanctioned 18 Saudi nationals and one entity in response to Saudi officials' 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, Turkey.²⁰ The Treasury Department has also sanctioned a number of individuals in connection with alleged Iranian government-supported plots to engage in transnational repression in the United States and elsewhere.²¹ In February 2021, the State Department announced a general policy (the "Khashoggi Ban"), drawing on Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) authority, allowing for the imposition of visa restrictions "on individuals who, acting on behalf of a foreign government, are believed to have been directly engaged in serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activities," including against journalists, activists, or other dissidents or their families or close associates.²² According to a December 2024 fact sheet, the Biden Administration took steps to impose pertinent visa restrictions against "over 100 individuals or their family members from Belarus, Hong Kong, Iran, PRC, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, and Venezuela," and over 20 individuals under a separate policy allowing for visa restrictions on individuals connected with the misuse of spyware for repression.²³

Actions to date under the second Trump Administration include March 2025 financial sanctions against Hong Kong officials for having used "Hong Kong national security laws extraterritorially to intimidate, silence, and harass 19 pro-democracy activists."²⁴ Also in March 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a visa restriction policy for "current or former foreign government officials responsible for, or complicit in, the forced return of Uyghurs or members of other ethnic or religious groups with protection concerns to China" and simultaneously imposed restrictions under the policy against unspecified current and former officials of the Government of Thailand in connection with the forced return of Uyghurs in February 2025.²⁵

Technology-Related Restrictions. During the Biden Administration, the U.S. government took several actions to combat the misuse of technology to abuse human rights, including for purposes of transnational repression. The Treasury Department sanctioned some entities in connection with the proliferation of commercial spyware that can be used to facilitate the targeting of dissidents worldwide,²⁶ and in the area of export controls, the Commerce Department added several spyware-related firms to the "Entity List" under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR).²⁷ The Commerce Department subsequently removed a company from the Entity List in October

²⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions 17 Individuals for Their Roles in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," November 15, 2018; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions the Saudi Rapid Intervention Force and Former Deputy Head of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Presidency for Roles in the Murder of Journalist Jamal Khashoggi," February 26, 2021.

²¹ See, for example, U.S. Department of the Treasury, "The United States and United Kingdom Target Iranian Transnational Assassinations Network," January 29, 2024.

²² U.S. Department of State (DOS), "Accountability for the Murder of Jamal Khashoggi," February 26, 2021.

²³ DOS, "Accountability Actions to Counter Global Corruption and Human Rights Abuses," December 9, 2024.

²⁴ DOS, "U.S. Sanctions Six Individuals for Undermining Hong Kong's Autonomy," March 31, 2025.

²⁵ DOS, "Announcement of a Visa Restriction Policy to Address the Forced Return of Uyghurs and Members of Other Ethnic or Religious Groups with Protection Concerns to China," March 14, 2025.

²⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Members of the Intellexa Commercial Spyware Consortium," March 5, 2024; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Enablers of the Intellexa Commercial Spyware Consortium," September 16, 2024.

²⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce, "Commerce Adds NSO Group and Other Foreign Companies to Entity List for Malicious Cyber Activities," November 3, 2021; U.S. Department of Commerce, "Commerce Adds Four Entities to Entity List for Trafficking in Cyber Exploits," July 18, 2023; DOS, "The United States Adds Sandvine to the Entity List for Enabling Human Rights Abuses," February 28, 2024. See also discussion of PRC-related restrictions under "Sanctions and Other Restrictive Measures" in CRS Report R48288, *Human Rights in China and U.S. Policy*.

2024 after it took steps to address the misuse of its technology.²⁸ Separately, Executive Order (E.O.) 14093 of March 2023 prohibited executive branch departments and agencies from using spyware that has been used by a foreign government or foreign person to surveil activists, journalists, and others for purposes of intimidation, to curb political dissent, or to limit freedoms of expression, assembly, or association.²⁹ To date, this E.O. appears to remain in force. In December 2025, the Treasury Department removed sanctions against some individuals who had been sanctioned in 2024 in connection with a commercial spyware consortium, reportedly after they "demonstrated measures to separate themselves" from the consortium.³⁰

Authority to Restrict Arms Sales

Some provisions of U.S. law can potentially be used to withhold U.S. security assistance or arms sales in response to acts of transnational repression. These include, most expressly, Section 6 of the Arms Export Control Act, which prohibits arms sales "to any country determined by the President to be engaged in a consistent pattern of acts of intimidation or harassment directed against individuals in the United States."³¹ According to an October 2023 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, this provision "has never been invoked since its enactment in 1981 and, with limited required reporting, it is unclear the extent to which it has been considered."³²

Multilateral Diplomacy. The United States has pursued some relevant multilateral efforts alongside like-minded governments, including through joint statements and a jointly developed international code of conduct regarding export controls and human rights.³³ The United States has participated in a working group on transnational repression under the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM), which aims to strengthen G7 coordination to respond to foreign threats to democracies.³⁴ A June 2025 statement by G7 leaders pledged to take several steps to combat transnational repression, including developing a joint "resilience and response framework."³⁵

Foreign Assistance Programs. The U.S. government has funded foreign assistance programs to document and combat transnational repression, as well as programs that broadly provide emergency support to human rights defenders around the world. In January 2025, the Trump Administration initiated a review of nearly all U.S. foreign assistance, pausing assistance programs globally and terminating numerous democracy and human rights projects.³⁶ Some

²⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, "Commerce Removes Sandvine from Entity List Following Significant Corporate Reforms to Protect Human Rights," October 21, 2024.

²⁹ E.O. 14093, "Prohibition on Use by the United States Government of Commercial Spyware That Poses Risks to National Security," 88 *Federal Register* 18957, March 27, 2023.

³⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Non-Proliferation and Iran-related Designations; Cyber-related and Russia-related Designations Removals," December 30, 2025; Raphael Satter, "Trump Administration Removes Three Spyware-Linked Executives from Sanctions List," *Reuters*, December 30, 2025.

³¹ 22 U.S.C. §2756.

³² GAO, *Human Rights: Agency Actions Needed to Address Harassment of Dissidents and Other Tactics of Transnational Repression in the U.S.*, GAO-24-106183, October 2023.

³³ DOS, "Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative Code of Conduct Released at the Summit for Democracy," March 30, 2023; U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, "Joint Statement on Transnational Repression," June 26, 2024; DOS, "U.S. Advances UN Recognition of Threats Posed by Commercial Spyware," October 11, 2024.

³⁴ DOS, "U.S. Achievements in Advancing Human Rights Globally," December 10, 2024.

³⁵ Government of Canada, "G7 Leaders' Statement on Transnational Repression," June 17, 2025. See also "G7 Compendium of Tools to Counter Transnational Repression" at <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scr/g7/imm-cmpndm-2025-en.aspx>; DOS, "Joint Statement on Hong Kong Arrest Warrants," August 8, 2025; and DOS, "G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Statement on Iranian Transnational Repression and Other Malign Activities," September 12, 2025.

³⁶ CRS Report R49019, *Democracy and Human Rights Promotion in the Trump Administration's Foreign Policy: In Brief*; CRS Insight IN12523, *U.S. Democracy and Human Rights Assistance: Recent Administration Actions*.

transnational repression-related projects were reportedly among those that were terminated.³⁷ The State Department in July 2026 began soliciting proposals for a project to support research on transnational repression and some other projects of potential relevance to combating transnational repression.³⁸

Enacted Legislation. Recent Congresses have enacted provisions of law specifically aimed at addressing transnational repression. These include a provision in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2024 (P.L. 118-31) that amended the statutory requirements for the State Department's annual human rights reports to require reporting on transnational repression.³⁹ Also notable is Section 6503 of the NDAA for FY2022 (P.L. 117-81), commonly referred to as the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention (TRAP) Act, which sought to address the misuse of INTERPOL databases and processes "in violation of international human rights standards." The act directed the executive branch to support INTERPOL reforms and required a biannual report, for four years, on the abuse of INTERPOL communications, among other provisions.⁴⁰ Congress also has enacted other pertinent provisions, such as those that imposed human rights-related restrictions on department and agency relationships with cyber surveillance firms,⁴¹ and that codified U.S. policy to combat the misuse of commercial spyware.⁴² Additionally, committee reports and explanatory statements accompanying some appropriations laws have included directives related to combating transnational repression.⁴³

Outlook and Selected Options for Congress

Transnational repression may be a persistent challenge in the years ahead, owing to factors such as the increased prevalence and international power of authoritarian governments, the increasing and evolving use of digital technologies and digital surveillance tools globally, and uneven domestic and international responses by governments. Aside from the enacted legislation noted above, some congressional committees/commissions have held hearings focused on transnational repression, and some Members have conducted oversight of executive branch policy responses vis-a-vis particular incidents or foreign governments. Members may engage in further areas of possible oversight, consider additional legislation to modify the U.S. government's policy responses to transnational repression, or both.⁴⁴

Possible Issues for Oversight. Members of Congress who wish to conduct oversight over U.S. policy responses to transnational repression may consider options such as

³⁷ For example, see <https://freedomhouse.org/effects-us-foreign-aid-freeze-freedom-house>.

³⁸ DOS, "DRL Global Documentation for Accountability Initiative," July 13, 2026.

³⁹ See 22 U.S.C. §2151n(d)(13).

⁴⁰ 22 U.S.C. §263b. The most recent publicly available TRAP Act report appears to be from 2024. See reports accessible at <https://www.justice.gov/archives/interpol-washington/interpol-washington-foia>. Some observers have argued that the reports have failed to adhere to specific reporting requirements set forth in the law. See Ted R. Bromund, Sandra Grossman, and Bradley Jardine, "What the U.S. Can Do to Address Transnational Repression Within Its Borders," New Lines Institute, July 2025, p. 11.

⁴¹ See §5502 of the FY2022 NDAA (P.L. 117-81) and §6318 of the FY2023 NDAA (P.L. 117-263).

⁴² §5304 of the FY2026 NDAA (P.L. 119-60).

⁴³ These have related, for example, to FBI capacity to combat transnational repression (S.Rept. 118-62 and S.Rept. 119-44), training for State Department personnel and foreign assistance allocations (S.Rept. 118-71 and explanatory statement accompanying Division F of P.L. 118-47), and intelligence community assessments (S.Rept. 118-81).

⁴⁴ The 2025 annual report of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) contains several general transnational repression-related policy recommendations. See CECC, *2025 Annual Report*, December 2025, pp. 31-32. See also CECC, "Report on the PRC's Transnational Repression and Malign Influence in 2025," June 2026.

- seeking information on the extent to which the State Department is raising or considering issues of transnational repression in relations with foreign governments, and on U.S. participation in new G7 efforts to combat transnational repression;
- assessing the use of sanctions to hold accountable individual perpetrators of transnational repression, including the possible merits and downsides of imposing sanctions against “host country” foreign government officials who facilitate transnational repression;
- evaluating the effectiveness of sanctions and export controls in combating the misuse of technology to facilitate transnational repression;
- scrutinizing whether and to what extent U.S. capacity to combat transnational repression has been affected by recent actions such as staffing or organizational changes at pertinent executive branch agencies, terminations of foreign assistance programs, and policy changes affecting migrants;⁴⁵
- assessing the impact of reforms undertaken by INTERPOL to protect against the misuse of INTERPOL systems and U.S. actions to support such reforms;⁴⁶
- assessing U.S. efforts to combat transnational repression affecting individuals in the United States and monitoring implementation of related GAO recommendations;⁴⁷ and
- examining U.S. immigration policies and actions as they relate to U.S. obligations under international human rights law, and the risk that some such policies or actions could facilitate transnational repression.⁴⁸

Pending Legislation. In the 119th Congress, several pending bills seek to address the issue of transnational repression within the United States and overseas. The Transnational Repression Policy Act (S. 2525/H.R. 4829) would codify a U.S. policy of combating transnational repression; require a State Department-led interagency strategy comprising diplomatic, foreign assistance, and law enforcement elements; authorize relevant training for federal, state and local officials; and require certain outreach and other activities by DOJ. Several other bills aim to bolster efforts to prevent and counter transnational repression within the United States by mandating certain Department of Homeland Security activities.⁴⁹ Other pending bills and resolutions include a focus on transnational repression in relation to particular foreign governments.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ See Schenkan et al., “Perpetrators and Methods of Transnational Repression and Possible Counter Strategies,” European Parliament, January 2026, pp. 40-42.

⁴⁶ See relevant discussion in Gorokhovskaia and Vaughan, “Collaboration and Resistance: Tracking Transnational Repression in 2025,” April 2026.

⁴⁷ See <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106183>.

⁴⁸ See Gorokhovskaia and Vaughan, “Collaboration and Resistance: Tracking Transnational Repression in 2025,” April 2026; Nate Schenkan, “Trump Is Supporting Transnational Repression,” *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2025.

⁴⁹ See H.R. 2139, H.R. 2158, and H.R. 2116.

⁵⁰ Regarding the PRC, for example, see S. 1542/H.R. 2635, S.Res. 226, H.Res. 130, and S.Res. 791.

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