**Conceptualizing caveats for political research:**

**Defining and measuring national reservations on the**

**use of force during multinational military operations**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The upsurge in post-Cold War coalition operations has stimulated research on*

*caveats: national reservations on the use of force in multinational military*

*operations. However, because the concept of caveats has no agreed-upon*

*definition, it is used inconsistently. This in turn impedes comparing research*

*findings across academic and policy studies and therefore systematic*

*research. This article is a contribution to the scholarly debate on how the*

*analytical concept of caveats are to be delimited. Crucially, we argue that*

*caveats result from some calculated political decision, and should not be*

*confused with reserved behavior due to financial and technical limitations, or*

*lack of coordination. We suggest that caveats are empirically observed and*

*measured in two ways: First, we argue that coalition rules of engagement*

*should be used as a yardstick for measuring direct reservations on the use of*

*force. Second, we suggest reservations on task-assignment and geographical*

*mobility should be used to register indirect reservations.*

**KEYWORDS**: Caveats; coalition warfare; rules of engagement; reluctant coalition-participation; NATO

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**Introduction**

The term caveats, or national caveats, refer to some kind of restrictions or

reservations that states impose on how their forces can operate when assigned

to a military coalition command. The phenomenon of caveats has attained

considerable attention among security scholars studying post-Cold War multinational

military operations. The use of the term caveats is particularly frequent

in research on NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)

campaign in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014 (e.g., Auerswald & Saideman,

2014). While allies sent troops to Afghanistan, the problem for

NATO’s commanders was that many of these troop contributions came

with onerous restrictions, caveats, detailing how they could operate. Consequently,

caveats not only undermined the military efficiency and effectiveness

of the coalition operations in Afghanistan, but their use also sparked debates

about burden-sharing resulting in tensions among coalition partners.

While caveats are often mentioned, the concept of caveats has no agreed upon

definition among security scholars. The term has been used to cover a

wide range of similar but still different phenomena within the context of multinational

military operations. Some studies refer to caveats in terms of how

national reservations have prevented military units from participating in

offensive and risky military operations (Mello, 2014, pp. 113–114; Ringsmose,

2010, p. 328; Sky, 2007, p. 16). Other scholars are focusing on the controlling

function of national staff officers, so-called red card-holders, assigned to

coalition command to make sure the national contingents are operating in

accordance with what the members of the coalition have agreed upon

(Høiback, 2009; Saideman & Auerswald, 2012, pp. 69–70; Young, 2003, p. 115).

Auerswald and Saideman (2014) define caveats as “restrictions placed upon

a contingent anticipating what they will be asked to do and setting rules for

these circumstances” (p. 6). In other studies, researchers relate caveats to

national constitutional conditions that lead to reserved coalition behavior

(e.g., Koschut, 2014, pp. 351–354; Van der Meulen & Kawano, 2008). One

study even allows the term caveats to cover the whole range of financial, logistical-,

and capacity-related restrictions regarding the military robustness of

the contingent (Brophy & Fisera, 2010, p. 1). The possibly most common conception

of caveats, especially in the context of the ISAF campaign in Afghanistan,

is the geographical limitations on force mobility states impose on their

military contingents (Kay, 2013, pp. 109–110; Noetzel & Rid, 2009, p. 75;

Noetzel & Schreer, 2009, p. 532).

Although the term caveats became a prominent part of the vocabulary of

security scholars with NATO’s experience in Afghanistan, military history

is full of examples similar to those described in NATO’s ISAF-campaign

that could be considered instances of the same phenomenon. The fact

remains though that much of the contemporary academic literature on

caveats is fragmented regarding the boundaries of the phenomenon. Studies

refer to partially overlapping phenomena, are almost unspoken about some

essential conceptual properties, and are either too broad or too narrow in

their conception of caveats to capture the essence, or complexity of the

phenomenon.

The lack of consistency in how the concept of caveats is termed, defined,

and empirically operationalized impedes systematic research and renders

comparability of research results across studies in doubt. In this article, we

address this gap in the literature. Through several lines of reasoning, we

argue defining properties and operational indicators to delimit the boundaries

of the concept of caveats as national reservations on the use of force. As such,

our article is a contribution to the broader study of the politics of coalition

warfare as reviewed in the introduction to the present issue (Mello & Saideman,

2019).

The article proceeds first by defining caveats through the arguing of five

key properties. Then we suggest to measure caveats in two ways: Directly as

national deviations from coalition rules of engagement, and indirectly as politically

motivated restrictions on coalition Force Commander’s full use of the

operational capacity of the national contingent. Last, we make some concluding

remarks on how our conceptualization of caveats may avoid confusing

states’ deliberate use of reservations on the use of their military forces in

coalition operations from instances of reserved behavior that have other

causes.

**Defining properties of caveats**

Scholars use concepts for some analytical purpose. The current emphasis is

that caveats constitute a problem for operational efficiency and challenge

cohesion among coalition partners. This is the legitimate focus of security

scholars (e.g., Marten, 2007; Deni, 2004; Ringsmose & Thruelsen, 2010) as

well as military practitioners (e.g., Jones, 2004; Clark, 2001; De Borchgrave,

2009). We instead approach caveats on the assumption that states’ reservations

in their military support to coalition operations are an instrument

that serves some political purpose in foreign policy-making. In particular in

the balancing of diverging concerns in alliance politics, domestic politics,

and the politics of implementation. While the use of restrictive caveats does

signal reluctant coalition-participation, caveats may also allow states to participate

in coalitions when they otherwise would have chosen to abstain.

Framed in such way, inconvenient caveats may be a blessing in disguise for

multinational military operations—if fighting alone is not a viable option

for the coalition-leading state (Fermann, 2019, pp. 5–16; Frost-Nielsen,

2017, 2016).

As a point of departure, we choose to understand caveats as reservations

concerning the use of force a government imposes upon its military units subordinated

to a coalition military command. To establish the more precise

boundaries of the caveats phenomenon, we elaborate on the initial definition

through several steps specifying the concept of caveats through reasoned

moves of extension and delimitation.

First, we choose to reserve the concept of caveats for conditions and reservations

that result from calculated political decision-making. This fundamental

specification captures the reality of caveats as a political instrument that

reflects some national intentions and priorities (Fermann, 2019, pp. 57–61;

Mello, 2019). A political understanding of caveats invites political agency

and is a precondition for any agency-related study of the politics of caveats.

The emphasizing of the political nature of caveats also builds an analytical

fence against restrictive military behavior that results from uncoordinated

action due to some limiting circumstances not related to political intent. For instance, reserved practice-patterns in the use of force that is not related to

calculated political intent, but rather traceable to the un-intended workings of

particular cultural, legal or doctrinal traditions are outside the boundaries of

the caveats concept (Findlay, 2002, pp. 354–359).

Exempted from the caveats concept is also reserved force-behavior due to

some operational, technical, or financial limitation. In reviewing caveats related

literature, we find that some force behavior resulting from resource

limitations are mistaken for caveats. For instance, the Norwegian Air Force

refrained from participating in offensive actions against Serb forces during

the 1999 NATO campaign against Serbia over the Kosovo conflict. This

decision was not due to some political motivation, but because the Norwegian

Air Force at the time was not capable of executing precision bombing at night.

The Norwegians were left to execute purely defensive missions in the airspace

above the Adriatic Sea (Anrig, 2015, p. 270).

This point is striking when we compare the technical restriction on the

Norwegian use of air power in the Kosovo conflict with the Dutch’s politically

motivated restrictions on the use of their F-16 fighter jets in the 2011 intervention

in Libya. The Dutch military had the necessary equipment and training to

engage in the offensive precision bombing, but the Dutch government decided

for political reasons to limit their contribution to the patrolling of the Libyan

airspace (Frost-Nielsen, 2016, p. 16). In the Norwegian case, reserved behavior

was due to technical limitations. In the Dutch case, reserved behavior was the

calculated implementation of political intent. Hence, to treat Norwegian and

Dutch reserved behavior as two expressions of the same phenomenon is erroneous,

because they belong to different causal domains.

Second, caveats understood in terms of national reservations on the use of

force is analytically distinct from the several initial political decisions whether

to contribute forces to the coalition, what and how large forces to deploy, and

for how long. Lumping the several decisions together in a single concept mask

potentially critical causal relationships between adjacent, but still separate

decisions in the foreign policy-making process. When governments decide

to contribute significant forces to coalitions, a decision remains to be made

concerning the terms contingent assigned to coalition command are

allowed to operate on at the battlefield. Critical in this regard are conditions

for the use of force regarding how, who, to what extent, where and when

within the area and time of deployment, to anticipate the discussion on how

to measure caveats empirically.

If restrictive reservations on the use of force signal reluctant participation,

it is reasonable to interpret the decision to apply caveats as means of tailoring

(moderating) participation according to some notion of national self-interest.

At this point, we may theorize how caveats contribute to solving political problems

at several negotiating and decision-making arenas: The application of

caveats may help governments to balance better the interests related to

complying with international demands to participate in the coalition by reducing

costs and risks of participation. Caveats may also solve problems related

to the harmonizing of international commitments to participate in the

coalition with what is feasible to agree upon in domestic politics. Finally, independently

of what states decide on what forces to contribute, governments

may want to apply caveats to control that national contingents do not

operate outside the political intentions motivating participation in coalition

in the first place (Fermann, 2019, pp. 127–183; Frost-Nielsen, 2017).

Politically speaking, caveats may thus prove to be a jack-of-all-trades policy

instrument. Analytically speaking, the crux of the matter is that for several

research purposes and theoretical lines of reasoning, we are likely to gain

more nuanced knowledge by separating the concept of caveats from other

decisions related to coalition participation. Initial decisions on whether and

how to contribute to a coalition regarding quality and size of forces are not

conceptually part of the caveats phenomenon, but adjacent phenomena that

may, or may not be influenced by or influence decisions on caveats

(Fermann, 2019, pp. 26–28).

Third, we suggest the definitional formulation that caveats relate to military

units subordinated to a coalition military command draws a line

against secondary, non-combatant and defensive operational contributions

to coalitions such as the facilitation of military hospitals and other support

functions. First, only combat units qualify as instruments of warfare, and

only combat units are thus potential recipients of reservations on the use of

force. Still, non-combatant and defensive operational contributions are

necessary for any military campaign. However, to provide such support is

not a reservation–as we define it–in itself. More self-evident, the initial

definition also rules out unilateral military operations from the empirical universe

of caveats. Scholarly discussion of caveats as defined is relevant only in a

multinational context. However, the analytical condition that national contingent

subordinated to a coalition chain of command also implies an expansion

of the empirical boundaries of the caveats-concept. Caveats are not limited to

the inclusion of NATO, UN and “coalition-of–the-willing” operations after

the end of the Cold War. Military history indicates that the application of

national reservations on the use of force is as old as coalition warfare (e.g.,

Riley, 2007). Hence, we suggest extending the generic scope of the concept of

caveats to include all past, present and future coalition forces that fulfill the

several criteria argued in the present section.

Fourth, for both empirical and semantic reasons we suggest the definition

of caveats as national reservations on the use of force include both restrictive

and permissive interpretations of the phenomenon of caveats (Fermann, 2019,

p. 60; Frost-Nielsen, 2016, pp. 15–16). The literature indicates that the vast

majority of national reservations on the use of force are restrictive. Still, the

history of caveats in coalition warfare shows at least a handful of reservation

instances that were permissive. An example is how the Danish government

ordered its ground forces in ISAF to disregard restrictive orders from

NATO if Danish contingent commanders on scene judged it necessary to

use additional military force in self-defense (Auerswald & Saideman, 2014,

p. 166). We may as well classify the regular practice of the United States to

insist on the prerogative of having an American general lead the coalition

force as a type of permissive caveats.

Further support for a symmetrical understanding of the conception of

caveats is the literal meaning of the word “caveat” as a “clause or a warning

that embodies specific limitations, conditions, or stipulations” (Concise

Oxford English Dictionary 2006, p. 225). While the term “limitations” captures

the predominant impression that caveats as national reservations on

the use of force much more often than not are about restricting the use of

force, “conditions” and “stipulations” are inclusive terms inviting both restrictive

and permissive caveats. A theoretical argument in favor of a symmetrical

understanding of national reservations on the use of force is that both restrictive

and permissive caveats may contribute to the fine-tuning of coalition participation

according to some perceived notion of national self-interest. Whereas restrictive caveats signal reluctant participation, permissive caveats may signal greater geopolitical responsibilities, enthusiastic participation, or low tolerance for own losses.

Finally, we suggest that those reservations on the use of force a government

imposes upon its military units subordinated to a coalition include not only

caveats announced, reported and codified in public political statements, operational

codes of conduct and white papers. Crucially, the concept of caveats

also covers the more informal, undeclared, and even denied use of national

reservations on the use of force that show in behavioral practice-patterns. An

example of informal and undeclared caveats is the German behavior in Afghanistan.

Germany placed significant caveats on military action in ISAF—

perhaps more so than any other country. Still, German officials tried their

best in public statements to conceal their restrictive policies on the use of

force to avoid the image of Germany as a risk-averse and uncommitted ally

(Auerswald & Saideman, 2014, pp. 146–147). In such cases, it is more

crucial than relying on official statements that caveats be revealed through

the systematic empirical study of military contingents’ behavior.

The study of actual behavior is particularly important when the nature of

military operation changes. The change will potentially affect states’ political

views on the operation, and, in turn, how they assess the political feasibility of

caveats. NATO’s air operations over Libya in 2011 was initially justified in

terms of the necessity to prevent civilian atrocities. When this objective was

accomplished conflict on the ground went into a stalemate that induced

key NATO members to turn the initially defensive nature of the mission

into the offensive. At this point, several other less enthusiastic coalition

members started informally applying restrictive caveats on their use of force

(Bouchard, 2012, p. 134).

The purpose of reasoning several additional properties to the initial theoretical

definition of caveats as those reservations on the use of force governments

impose upon its military units subordinated to a coalition military

command was to offer an analytical construct with considerably higher resolving

and phenomena-discriminating power. The question remains, however,

how are we more precisely to measure national reservations on the use of force

as restrictive or permissive caveats in actual behavior in a theater of war?

**Observing caveats**

In arguing how to measure the phenomenon of caveats, we need to relate

observable caveats-behavior to the primary mechanisms for the regulation

of the use of force in military organizations. Indeed, caveats have no observable

meaning if not related to some regulatory framework at the level of the

coalition (Fermann, 2019, pp. 41–51). We suggest that caveats as reservations

on the use of force in multinational military operations are empirically

observed and measured in two ways: First, we argue that coalition rules of

engagement (ROE) be used as a yardstick for measuring direct reservations

on the use of force. Second, we suggest reservations on task-assignment and

geographical mobility be used to register indirect reservations on the use of

force.

***National deviations from coalition rules of engagement***

Firstly, we may observe national reservations on the use of force as deviations

from coalition ROE. ROE are guidelines that inform soldiers and commanders

on (i) what conditions need be fulfilled to take specific military action, and (ii)

who has the authority to make decisions on the use of force under different

circumstances (Frost-Nielsen, 2018). More precisely, the first dimension of

ROE supervises decisions to various degrees of specificity as to when,

where, against whom, and how military force used. The second dimension

relates to how delegating the ROE is regarding who has the authority to

make judgments about conditions for using force and approve of specific military

actions at different levels of command.

All military operations need ROE to coordinate the use of force and make

sure that military implementation serves political intentions and abide by

legal requirements. In an attempt to anticipate circumstances arising in the

field, political, operational and legal considerations, dilemmas and trade-offs

concerning military conduct are translated into operational guidelines

for the use of force. ROE is even more crucial in coalition forces in coordinating

the use of force among different nations’ combat units because national

contingents are likely to harbor diverging perceptions of the political mandate

for the operations, and to diverge in military training levels and proficiency. It

is precisely because the force-regulating guidelines of ROE inevitably represent

some political priorities (recall, “war is politics by other means”) this

mechanism qualifies as an anchor pile for measuring national reservations

on the use of force. There will always be some ROE against which national

deviations on the use of force be measured even if ROE vary in robustness

and specificity across operations. This common denominator makes national

deviations from coalition ROE a context-independent yardstick capable of

supporting generic research ambitions (Fermann, 2019, pp. 61–64).

A government applies caveats to the extent the national military contingent

in its operational practice and for political reasons deviates from the coalition

ROE, whether in the conditions for the use of force and the kind of force permitted,

or in terms of who has the authority to question the use of force at

different levels in the coalition chain of command. By comparing coalition

ROE and relevant national behavior, we recognize caveats in national deviations

from the force-regulating guidelines of the coalition ROE (conditions,

actions), and in an assertive government somehow interfering in the coalition

chain of command.

National interference in coalition chain of command is observable in the

discretion granted by governments to national representatives to veto

orders from coalition chain of command (“red card-holder”). The function

of “red card-holders” is institutionalized in NATO and beyond, and implies

that national “commanders can choose not to obey orders coming from the

multinational chain of command if the [national] commander views the

orders as being illegal, contrary to his or her country’s national interest, or

excessively reckless” (Auerswald & Saideman, 2014, p. 5). For example, the

Dutch contingent in ISAF applied caveats by insisting that if military personnel

(a Dutch “red card-holder”) in the planning of an operation find that the

mission implied specific risks, NATO could not use Dutch contingent without

the explicit approval of the Dutch government (Auerswald & Saideman, 2014,

pp. 159–160).

National interference to veto (or to instigate) particular use of a national

contingent is also observed in the more subtle intervention of national staff

officers assigned to coalition command to ensure coalition Force Commander

uses national contingent by what coalition has agreed to. An instance of this

“gate-keeping” function at work is supposedly the Danish practice of discretely

using Danish staff officers assigned to a coalition command to make sure

their contingents did not have to execute missions that Danish officers knew

would not be agreeable to the Danish government (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 274).

Crucial, ROE regulates the use of force at multiple levels of operational

command, from the coalition Force Commander via the Contingent Commander

down to the private soldier. Hence, we may observe national

reservations on the use of force also on the tactical level of the platoon commander

and the individual level of the fighter pilot and gun operator as deviations

as to who has the authority to make decisions on conditions for using

force and how. Which, in turn, implies that delimiting research only to cover

those officers assigned official “red card-holder” authority will leave much

caveats-relevant data untouched.

***National inflexibility in coalition’s use of national contingent***

Secondly, we may observe national reservations on the use of force in the

extent to which coalition is delegated authority to make full use of the operational

capacity of the national contingent. When a national military unit is

assigned to coalition command, and it is part of a settlement that the contingent

is to be deployed in a particular area, or that the unit is assigned a specific

role which is functionally limited to the execution of particular tasks, these

conditions are not adequately registered as deviations from the coalition

ROE in either of the two discussed dimensions. Such reservations on the

use of force are instead regulated in settlements in NATO, or in bilateral

force agreement negotiated between the coalition-leading state and the contributing

government.

In NATO’s ISAF-campaign in Afghanistan, it has been a persistent

problem that contributing governments have not allowed NATO to

regroup national contingents and move military units from one sector to

another as operational circumstances require. States may have behaved consistent

with coalition ROE, but not allowed NATO to move national forces

around to where coalition command finds the best military use of them. In

2006, Norwegian Special Forces were politically limited to operate in the

vicinity of Kabul. The unit was not under restrictive caveats as to how they

could operate within the agreed area of deployment. However, NATO’s

command was not allowed to deploy the unit for missions in other regions

of Afghanistan where it might have been put to better use (Trønnes, 2012,

pp. 68–71).

Another case related to reservations on the use of force not registered as

deviations from ROE is how contributing states do not allow the coalition

to use their contingents for highly prioritized missions even within the

national contingent’s area of deployment. From the outset to the end, the

Dutch government did not allow the coalition command to use their

fighter-jets for offensive targeting during the 2011 Libya campaign. Still, the

Dutch executed defensive missions in complete agreement with coalition

ROE (Frost-Nielsen, 2017, pp. 381–384).

This kind of restrictive caveats fails to register as deviations from ROE precisely

because in a professional military context ROE is not the mechanism

regulating what kind of mission contingents asked to execute and where to

deploy. ROE only provides directions on how to implement assigned mission.

Declining to take on specific missions assigned by coalition command with

reference to a force-generating and burden-sharing mechanism (a settlement)

also influencing contingent’s use of force is nevertheless a result of a calculated

political decision to reserve oneself from entirely subordinating national contingent

to coalition command. This empirical indicator is context specific and

thus requires knowledge about the particular contingent’s military capabilities

to be able to judge whether the geographical and task-specific restrictions are

due to political reservations, or due to some military, technical or financial

limitations (Fermann, 2019, pp. 64–66).

**Conclusion**

The upsurge in post-Cold War coalition operations has stimulated political

research on phenomena resembling national reservations on the use of

force in coalition contexts. The present article is a contribution to the scholarly

debate on how caveats as national reservations on the use of force are

to be delimited and made empirically observable. There is no agreement on

this issue in the literature on caveats. Studies refer to partially overlapping

phenomena, are almost unspoken about some essential conceptual properties,

and are either too broad or too narrow in their conception of caveats to

capture the essence, or complexity of the phenomenon.

Inconsistencies in the conceptual delimitation of caveats are in part due to

scholars using the concept for different research purposes. Nevertheless,

inconsistency in how the concept is to be defined and measured across

studies impedes systematic research and renders comparability of research

findings in doubt. What seems to be required is an agreed upon concept of

caveats which better distinguishes the phenomenon from adjacent phenomena,

and capable of recognizing different kinds of national reservations on

the use of force.

Reasoning several additional properties, the initial definition of caveats as

national reservations on the use of force evolved into an analytical construct

with considerably higher resolving and phenomena-discriminating power:

Caveats are politically motivated, national reservations on the use of force in a

coalition force, where military contingents are subordinated to a unified chain

of command and relate to some common regulation of the use of force. Particular

national reservations for the use of force can be either of a restrictive, or a

permissive kind, and may be publicly recognized as such, or be informal, undeclared,

and even denied by the force-contributing nation, only to be observed in

actual force-deviating behavior not related to lack of capacity, coordination

failure or bad luck.

In measuring the phenomenon of national reservations on the use of force in

coalition operations, caveats need to be related to the primary mechanisms for

the regulation of the use of force and mission assignment in military organizations.

Such regulatory mechanisms at the level of the coalition are yardsticks

against which we can measure national behavior related to use of force.

First, national reservations on the use of force is observable in national contingent’s

deviations from the coalition ROE in terms of (i) when, where, against

whom, and how military force used, and (ii)who has the authority to make judgments

about conditions for using force and approve of specific military actions at

different levels of command. ROE are guidelines for the use of force in military

organizations, addresses soldiers at various levels of command, and are directional

rather than commanding. These attributes of ROE provide soldiers with

discretion to execute operational judgment in the field. The directional and

sometimes only suggestive character of ROE also offer caveats-prone governments

with considerable latitude to interfere in and regulate how their military

forces can operate when executing orders from the coalition command.

Second, we observe national reservations on the use of force in the extent to

which a government is unwilling to delegate authority to the coalition to make

full use of the operational capacity of the national contingent. Such reservations

include restrictions on using national contingent outside the designated

area of deployment, and on what mission Contingent Commander is

willing to execute. However, such national reservations do not register as deviations

from the force-regulating mechanism of ROE, which is mainly a guideline

for how to use force. National reservations on the use of force relating to

decisions regarding whether to accept executing a military mission and where

to use force are not regulated in ROE, but instead in settlements in NATO, or

in a bilateral force agreement negotiated between the coalition-leading nation

and the contributing government.

By systematically applying the more complex and precise conceptual construct

of caveats, we may observe and reflect upon previously undetected

instances and kinds of caveats. Common to the operational dimensions of

the caveats concept is the fundamental attribute that national reservations

on the use of force are not the reflection of some lack of military capacity,

insufficient coordination or chance, but the result of a calculated political

decision, serving some foreign policy-purpose. However, in classifying particular

caveats, it is, depending on the research question, crucial to consult

also other distinguishing properties of the concept relating to whether the

caveats in question are of a restrictive or permissive kind, and the extent to

which caveats used are officially recognized or not. The proposed conceptual

construct of caveats is sophisticated enough to invite research at several levels

of analyses explaining why coalition members may choose to apply particular

kinds of caveats, and thus capable of supporting also a Foreign Policy Analysis

approach inviting the use of middle-range theory at multiple levels of analyses

(Fermann, 2019, pp. 71–123). A primary data-gathering challenge before

executing any explanatory analysis is, of course, to substantiate that informal

caveats are at work and to render probable that the reservations in question

are politically motivated (Fermann, 2019, 185–233).

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