

A Review of ‘High Stakes Diplomacy’: Fostering Effective Negotiation Skills through Experiential Learning

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*Teaching Innovation Award, 2022 Georgia Political Science Association Annual Meeting.

ABSTRACT

For some time, simulations have been used to understand the complexity of international relations and diplomacy. Many contemporary teacher-scholars believe using simulations, games, and strategic exercises is the most effective way to teach learners negotiation skills. This multi-day immersive setting allows students to develop character profiles and apply theory-driven strategies to a real-world diplomatic crisis. Develop the High Stakes Diplomacy (HSD) model of principled negotiation for use in international relations and diplomacy courses. HSD is an experiential learning simulation designed to educate learners on the perils of positional bargaining in international negotiation, enhance student leadership and followership experiences, and engender positive diplomacy skills. The High Stakes Diplomacy simulation, developed in January 2022, supports the application of experiential learning techniques for knowledge retention, student learning, student motivation, and theory-building. To assess learning, this study draws on Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, which consists of four points of awareness: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. The frequentative negotiation rounds occurred across three 75-minute class sessions. The author used pre-assessments, multiparty peer observations, and a post-assessment survey and debriefing to gauge learning outcomes and experiment validity. The post-simulation survey revealed that 83.3 percent of participants found the High Stakes Diplomacy simulation facilitated greater learning of the method of principled negotiation. This result reflects a 50 percent increase in student learning from pre-assessment levels.

Introduction

Using simulations in international relations (IR) courses is not new. Scholars have developed and employed this form of experiential learning since the 1950s (Lantis 1998). Harold Guetzkow and his five colleagues created one of the earliest IR simulations, the Inter-Nation Simulation (Guetzkow et al. 1963). The Inter-Nation Simulation provides players with rules for mimicking the national decision-making structure of a nation-state and describing their capabilities in the international system. It incorporates domestic constraints on policymaking into the student experience (Coplin 1966). Since Guetzkow et al.'s experiential learning breakthrough, the development and use of simulations for IR courses have grown exponentially and have become a regular element of coursework (e.g., Lantis 1998; Thomas 2002; Wheeler 2006; Matzner and Herrenbrück 2017; Raymond and Sorensen 2017; Siegel and Young 2009; Brynen 2010; Hendrickson 2021; Schechter 2021).

One factor the simulations mentioned above have in common is their desire to educate students on applying international relations theory to real-world contexts. This simulation is different. The High Stakes Diplomacy (HSD) simulation uses contemporary international conflicts to apprise students of the tools of international negotiation. The benefit of this approach resides in its multi-day programmatic structure. Facilitators may substitute this crisis topic with another as they adhere to the multi-day learning architecture. This flexibility empowers facilitators to tailor topical content to their class needs.

Study Objectives

High Stakes Diplomacy obtained a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) experiential learning endorsement in April 2022 at the university where it was developed. QEP endorsements are awarded to experiential learning opportunities recognized as possessing “High Impact Practices,” which significantly contribute to student success and growth. This study aims to investigate how using an in-class experiential learning game enhances knowledge comprehension of Roger Fisher and William Ury's (1981) method of principled negotiation. There are four central objectives:

- Study Objective 1: Teach students about the perils of positional bargaining and the danger of this approach to interparty relations.

- Study Objective 2: Demonstrate the utility and long-term benefits of principled negotiation as described by the authors.
- Study Objective 3: Connect the method of principled negotiation to real-world, high-impact events that concern war, peace, and diplomacy.
- Study Objective 4: Educate students on contemporary diplomatic crises through experiential and active learning techniques.

This simulation facilitates active learning of negotiation strategies “for students who [do and] do not respond well to more conventional approaches” in higher education (Newmann and Twigg 2000, 835). The following section defines the experiential learning model used to develop the High Stakes Diplomacy simulation and the research design. Section three introduces the simulation’s format and multi-day structure, while the penultimate section reviews the study’s results and highlights student experiences. Finally, this article concludes with a brief discussion of experiential learning and its implications for the future.

Experiential Learning and Diplomatic Negotiations: Applying David Kolb’s Model

Over the past several decades, higher education has seen a multidimensional shift from lecture-based classrooms to “learner-centered environments” (Misseyanni et al. 2018, 1). The High Stakes Diplomacy simulation was developed using David Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model of knowledge acquisition. Kolb argues that learning is fundamentally broader than our contemporary understandings of the “school classroom.” Most experiential learning models, including Kolb’s, suggest that learning is rooted in a natural tension. Conflict ensues when existing beliefs, values, and concepts encounter alternative explanations, resulting in knowledge creation. Learning, at its core, is fundamentally a “process of human adaptation,” wherein we broaden our knowledge, skills, and attitudes by confronting new facts and theories of change (Kolb 1984, 32). Kolb’s model of experiential learning is composed of four central features: a concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE) (Ibid, 30). These features form the basis of HSD and this study’s research design.

According to Kolb, effective learners must demonstrate four kinds of skills. First, learners must willingly enter new experiences without bias (CE). Introducing new experiences allows knowledge creation, ordinarily by challenging existing learner perceptions. This is often the largest hurdle in simulations: achieving buy-in from student participants. The second stage of the experiential learning process – RO – empowers learners to reflect on their new experiences from diverse perspectives. Reflection is an intellectual exercise that stimulates critical thinking in the learner. RO forces students to be aware of their actions vis-à-vis the simulation, helping them make astute observations about the quality of their decision-making process. Third, based on their reflections, the learner must develop “concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC)” (Ibid). This stage allows students to comprehend the material and connect their actions in the simulation to the scholarly theory underpinning the exercise. Finally, the participant shall use these theories to inform future behavior (AE) by converting knowledge obtained in the simulation “to make decisions and solve problems” (Ibid).

The benefit of an active learning process, as described by Kolb (1984), is that the learner becomes a crucial part of knowledge creation compared to traditional lecture, where knowledge is merely transferred from instructor to student. Effective learning is achieved through this iterative learning process. With active learning simulations, the learner becomes an equal party to knowledge creation and may often discover new perspectives that would have otherwise been lost during traditional educational methods.

The High Stakes Diplomacy Simulation

High Stakes Diplomacy was developed to illustrate the many challenges of international negotiation present in our world today. This simulation was constructed in January 2022 during Russia’s military buildup along Ukraine’s northern and eastern borders. High Stakes Diplomacy was first playtested with students four days before the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Simulation Design

This simulation was developed for upper-division international relations and political science courses, where students understand global issues, the international system, foreign policy, and diplomacy. HSD was developed in accordance with a player-centric design process, meaning the simulation emphasizes learner experiences over procedural objectives (c.f., Fullerton 2014; Montserrat et al. 2017; Deterding et al. 2011). By deepening the simulation’s realism and character composition, the exercise enables students to internalize learning outcomes by enhancing their educational adventure. Before implementation, the simulation underwent peer review by five content specialists and one teaching and learning professional. HSD adhered to Neves et al.’s (2021) design process; once the simulation reached viability, it was formally tested with students. The author playtested

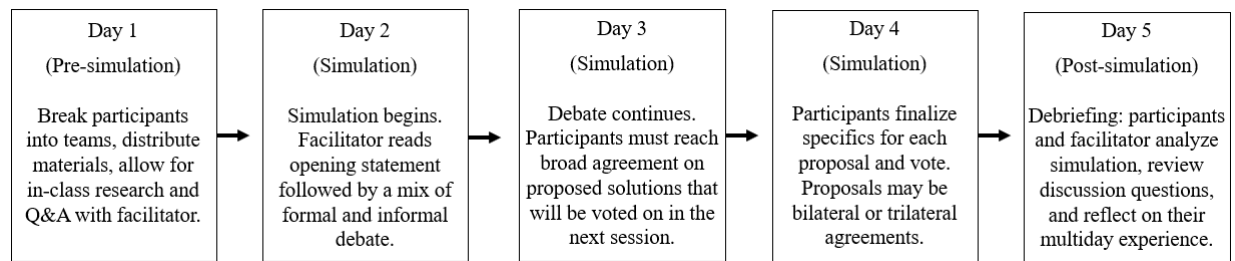


Figure 1. Phases of the High Stakes Diplomacy Simulation

HSD in an upper-division Model United Nations course at a public university in the southern United States in the spring of 2022.

HSD was built as a semi-structured team and individual negotiation. The simulation oscillates between formal team debate and informal breakout sessions that allow for one-on-one negotiations among participants. The simulation is intended for 12 to 18 participants and takes place over five 75-minute class sessions. Depending on the availability of time, the simulation may be shortened to three 75-minute class sessions if participants conduct external research before the simulation and the facilitator foregoes the debriefing session. Ideally, participants should read Roger Fisher and William Ury's seminal book, *Getting to Yes, Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (1981), between four and six weeks before the start of the simulation. For classes without this requirement, students should be exposed to Fisher and Ury's chapter one, "Don't Bargain Over Positions," during the same period. Advanced exposure to Fisher and Ury's method of principled negotiation forms the basis of the experiential learning objectives.

There are three team delegations: the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the United States of America. Each delegation should be comparable in size. The facilitator should encourage each delegation to divide itself into two specialist teams. This subdivision allows each team to work directly with an opposing country during informal debate, where substantive progress is often reached. For example, the Ukrainian delegation would divide itself into "Group A and "Group B." The former would communicate with the delegates from the United States during informal debate, while the latter would converse with the Russian Federation. This division of labor enables participants to specialize in one country during the preparation and research phase.

On day one, each delegation and its members receive two documents. The first text provides country-specific instructions and background information on the delegation's primary, secondary, and tertiary goals. There are three initial tasks each delegation must address. First, the participants will select a chief negotiator to represent their delegation. This individual coordinates team actions during the research and negotiation phases. Second, each team must designate one player as the official notetaker for the proceedings. This student will use the facilitator-provided handout to record progress during formal and informal negotiations. The facilitator should reinforce to delegations that choose to divide themselves into two country specialist groups that they should select two notetakers to maintain a record of all discussions during formal and informal debates. After each day, the notetakers will return the handouts to the facilitator for review.

Finally, each delegation must construct a negotiation strategy based on their goals in the country's background guides. The country background guides list the country's strengths and weaknesses. For instance, some strengths of the Russian delegation include: (1) possesses the ability to mobilize up to 175,000 troops along Ukraine's borders with Russia and Belarus; (2) previous military success in annexing the Ukrainian territory Crimea; (3) controls much of the oil and natural gas exports to Europe; (4) negotiators are empowered to lie or cheat so long as they do not undermine or impede Russian President Vladimir Putin's geostrategic agenda. Some weaknesses include: (1) vulnerable to international financial sanctions, particularly if removed from the Swift banking system; (2) new sanctions could jeopardize the construction of Nord Stream 2, a natural gas pipeline to Germany, and reduce much-needed revenue; (3) war is financially costly, and Russia may not be able to subsidize a long war; (4) NATO may choose to arm the Ukrainian military with defensive and offensive weapons if war ensues posing a significant threat to Russian military equipment and personnel.

The second document players receive includes a simulation map detailing Russian military positions, the separatist-controlled areas of Ukraine, and the Russian annexed region of Crimea. Below the simulation map is a short description of the rules of procedure for the simulation, which the facilitator should review on day one. The author provides a complete compendium of the supplemental materials online for interested readers (see footnote one).

Simulation

This scenario introduces students to track-one and track-two interstate diplomacy. The simulation begins with formal negotiations and then oscillates between formal and informal debates. Each negotiation round is limited to 12 minutes. At the start of each day, the facilitator highlights the desired goals for the session. This is an important simulation component as

it keeps delegations on track for simulating each phase of an international negotiation. At the start of day two, the first day of negotiations, the workspace should be arranged into a square (or rectangular) table format. All three team delegations should be seated at one side of the venue, and the facilitator shall occupy the remaining position. Each delegation must be provided a designated private workspace for team meetings. If classroom space is limited, facilitators can reserve a spare classroom or use hall space, if feasible. The facilitator will first welcome all delegations to the international summit and read a pre-written script of opening remarks. This statement provides the historical and contemporary context for the negotiation. After the facilitator finishes opening remarks, round one begins with formal statements from each delegation. The chief negotiator typically speaks these remarks. Each speaker has three minutes to lay out their opening position. When time has concluded, the facilitator strikes a gavel to indicate a transition from formal to informal debate or vice versa.

HSD's semi-structured format allows players to experience the formality of interstate negotiations juxtaposed against the backroom, spontaneous nature of track-two diplomacy. During informal debate, the facilitator should continuously rotate around the workspace to oversee negotiations among players. It is useful to remind each delegation to divide itself into two specialist teams to allow for greater simultaneous discussions among all parties during these breakout sessions. Participants will find during day two, most parties occupy their hardline positions established during the formal debate. Players representing the Russian Federation will expectantly occupy the most intransigent perspectives. This means they will likely view opposing parties as hostile, continuously "demand concessions as a condition of the relationship," exhibit fiery rhetoric, become obstinate to change, make threats, and "try to win a contest of will" with the opposing groups (Fisher and Ury 2011, 9). After the second day, the facilitator should remind players to reflect on Fisher and Ury's three negotiation models and why they may have been unable to employ the method of principled negotiation.

At the start of the third day, the facilitator may allow for formal opening remarks at the beginning of the session, or they may move directly into informal debate regardless of how the previous session concluded. There are benefits to each approach, depending on the players' experience during the preceding day. If delegations could form tentative agreements on the previous day, beginning the new session with formal remarks may assist in clarifying the proposed agreements. However, and this is most probable, after day two, all parties will likely remain entrenched in their initial positions. In this scenario, the facilitator should begin with an informal debate at the start of the session to avoid further diplomatic entrenching by each team in their initial proffers. At the start of the session, facilitators should remind delegations that only those agreements reached in abstract form by the end of the class period may be discussed and voted on during the final day of negotiations. This time constraint forces delegations to make concessions by mimicking hard breaks in track-one diplomacy settings (Gino and Moore 2008). While many interstate negotiations fail, HSD aims to expose students to each phase of the negotiation process. This means the facilitator should ensure that some agreement is reached – in at least abstract form by the end of day three – to further the learning process on the final day of talks.

Depending on the participants' daily progress, the facilitator has four optional simulation crises that can be introduced as "breaking news updates." When employing these breaking news updates, the facilitator should strike the gavel and read aloud one of the optional simulation crises described in the online compendium. The breaking news updates are titled: (1) Drive a wedge between the U.S. and Ukrainian delegations; (2) Assassination attempt on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky; (3) NATO military mobilization; and (4) Germany's diplomatic rebellion against the U.S, Ukraine, and NATO countries. Each optional simulation twist forces players to adjust their negotiation tactics to a new diplomatic environment.

Day four marks the final day of negotiations. To maximize player experience, the negotiation days have been separated into two stages to emphasize different learning objectives. Stage one takes place during the first two days of negotiations. This phase exposes participants to the many struggles of international diplomacy. However, if left to their own volition, players will likely remain in the "debate" stage for most of the multi-day experience. Therefore, this simulation aspect is limited to the first two days. Day four is reserved for addressing the specific solutions agreed upon by the parties to the conflict and finalizing the details of the agreements. This time, division came about from the playtesting phase. HSD was simulated in February-March 2022 with 13 students. Players were asked to complete a questionnaire about their experience after the simulation. One question asked students to identify the major roadblocks to success they encountered. One main impediment to student success centered on the reality that most delegations occupied hardline positions for most of the simulation. As a result, the time allotted for conflict resolution was noticeably shorter than the time experienced in the debate stage. Based on this observation and student feedback, HSD was amended to reflect this two-stage format, which lengthens players' time for each simulation aspect.

Ideally, by the conclusion of day four, delegations should vote on several joint communiques between all or some of the negotiating countries. Only those joint communique voted on and approved by the signatories shall be recorded in the official proceedings and posted to the course webpage by the facilitator. The parties may sign bilateral or trilateral agreements, depending on how negotiations evolve. Any communique not agreed to and signed by delegations at the end of this session will be discarded.

Post-simulation

High Stakes Diplomacy is an experiential learning exercise designed to expose students to international diplomacy and conflict resolution challenges. Rarely are there clear “winners” in international relations. This simulation underscores the grueling nature of conflict resolution when confronting issues of war and peace. For many facilitators, the simulated experience is sufficient for teaching and evaluation. Some facilitators may want to “score” player experiences according to each team’s ability to accomplish their primary, secondary, or tertiary goals. The scoring method can be accomplished during the debriefing session.

If desired, the facilitator can award points for each objective a delegation could insert into a joint communique listed in their country background guides. Teams earn one point for each tertiary goal accomplished, two points for secondary goals, and three points for primary goals. It is common for delegations to achieve more tertiary than primary goals because of the logrolling nature of negotiations. Additionally, this evaluation can ignite a class discussion of student experiences during the simulation. The post-simulation debriefing is a crucial step in conveying the utility of this exercise. This allows for an analytically rich discussion of why and how players chose a negotiation strategy and whether it was successful. The following is a sample of discussion questions facilitators may pose:

- How and why did your delegation select a chief negotiator and notetaker(s)?
- What qualities make a good chief negotiator and a good negotiator?
- How and why did your team prioritize specific goals in your country background guide?
- Having completed the simulation, what is your reaction to the differences between formal and informal debate? Which was most effective and why?
- Why was it difficult to use the method of principled negotiation?
- How did emotion factor into your negotiations? Was your delegation driven by a desire to “punish” the opposing team or accomplish your stated goals, and why?

Results

High Stakes Diplomacy (HSD) aims to enhance student learning of Fisher and Ury’s (1981) approach to negotiation. HSD was playtested in a Model United Nations course at a regional comprehensive university in February-March 2022. All players were asked to participate in a pre-assessment activity, a post-simulation assessment and questionnaire, and a post-simulation debriefing. Of the thirteen student players, twelve completed the questionnaire. Students were asked a variety of questions about their experience. When asked how much they liked or disliked the simulation, 91.6 percent of respondents marked “like a great deal” and “like somewhat,” with 75 percent marking the former category. This result corroborates previous research findings that tested student excitement in an American foreign policy and national security course where the use of simulations saw a 76.6 percent positive effect by students surveyed (Hendrickson 2021, 318). Students were also asked to rate the simulation’s ability to resemble real-life negotiations. Seventy-five percent marked “very realistic” and “somewhat realistic.” Finally, 100 percent of respondents indicated that they would like more of their classes to use similar active learning techniques.

When HSD was initially playtested, the negotiation phase lasted for two 75-minute class sessions. When asked to describe the ideal number of class periods, 75 percent of respondents indicated three days was the ideal timeframe. During the playtesting phase, HSD underwent a second peer review process by two content experts. Both reviewers independently corroborated the students’ suggestions. Subsequently, it was determined that the preferred number of class sessions for negotiation would be three 75-minute meetings, along with separate days reserved for research and debriefing sessions. Therefore, HSD should ideally occur over five days, with one day reserved for pre-simulation activities, three for negotiations, and a final day for debriefing and a post-simulation wrap-up.

Approximately three weeks before HSD began, students were asked to complete a pretest assessment on their understanding and knowledge of Fisher and Ury’s theory of principled negotiation. There were two components to the pre-assessment. The first was an in-class journaling exercise. Students answered the following questions: (1) What makes a successful negotiation? (2) What is the difference between hard and soft negotiation? and (3) What is the method of principled negotiation? Following this pre-assessment, students were divided into three four-person groups to test their ability to apply Fisher and Ury’s negotiation approach to real-world negotiation case studies. Together, the written and oral examinations created a baseline assessment for each student’s understanding and application of the method of principled negotiation.

Twelve of the thirteen students participating in the course completed the journaling task. All students could identify some of the scholarly literature’s key competencies for successful negotiation. These include understanding the rules of engagement from the outset (Helmond 2020), seeking agreement on what is being negotiated before negotiations fully develop (Whitney

1983), the use of time and personality to accomplish one's goals (McCarthy and Hay 2015), negotiating with your partner's benefits in mind (Opresnik 2014), compromise (McCarthy and Hay 2015), be able to satisfy seemingly contradictory goals (Park et al. 2013), maintain an appropriate balance of power between all parties involved (Korda 2011), engage in active listening (Helmond 2020), understand there is no one size fits all solution to every problem (Schoen 2022), when possible, seek a win-win solution (Maddux 1986; Leritz 1994), ideally, come to a conclusion where all parties feel comfortable re-engaging in negotiations at a future time (Opresnik 2014), know what you want (Korda 2011), and understand how leadership plays into negotiation outcomes (Zohar 2015).

About half of the students struggled with defining hard and soft negotiation tactics. Most understood that hard negotiators treat their opponents as adversaries, while soft negotiators view the opposition as friendlier. Nevertheless, many students lacked a deeper understanding of the nuances of each approach—the most important pre-assessment question related to principled negotiation. Here, 75 percent of students could identify some of the central elements of Fisher and Ury's approach. However, only about one-third of all students possessed a high level of understanding. In other words, students were partially familiar with the theory behind principled negotiation but could not consistently replicate the model in the written and oral activities. Together, these assignments provided a baseline understanding of the desired approach and set the stage for the HSD simulation.

During the debriefing phase, students were asked whether High Stakes Diplomacy facilitated greater learning of Fisher and Ury's approach. Eighty-three (83.3) percent marked "Yes, a great deal was learned." One benefit of experiential learning is that students often learn more from their mistakes than successes. The excellent character performance of the students representing the Russian Federation and their persistent obstruction to the proceedings enabled the class to bring to life the real-world challenges of international diplomacy and the particulars of this contemporary international crisis. While all students were trained in Fisher and Ury's approach, students routinely found themselves caught in the heat of the moment and occupying defensive, sometimes intransigent negotiation positions. This almost innate, reflexive instinct largely prevented the delegations from working toward their mutual self-interests. HSD allows students to encounter the hostility of real-world negotiations in a controlled, safe environment where they are free to experiment without fear of punishment. This simulation allows players to build up negotiation "anti-bodies" that can be recalled at a future date when confronted with unyielding partners.

When asked in the debriefing questionnaire, what did you learn from the simulation? One respondent wrote, "I learned much about negotiating on a practical level instead of just using theory." This student disclosed that they also learned about the on-going political crisis in Ukraine, which they had little knowledge of. This is another benefit to the High Stakes Diplomacy model. Facilitators can amend HSD to address other contemporary international disputes if the simulation's multi-day procedure remains. Another student noted that we often associate success in negotiations with those who are the strongest party. This respondent said, "I learned that you may go into a negotiation as a strong country hard set on multiple ideals, but you may come out of it with nothing you first set out to do." If students were left to read about the perils of hard negotiation, they might not have reached this analytically rich understanding of negotiation and its many challenges. High Stakes Diplomacy connects theory-driven strategies to real-world events. This approach resonates with students and empowers them to be knowledge creators rather than memorizers.

Discussion

Applying experiential learning simulations to international relations and diplomacy courses has enormous potential. There are four broad implications of this study. First, this paper corroborates previous scholarly findings that show student interest and excitement in course content increases when instructors utilize simulations (see Hendrickson 2021). Students value non-traditional approaches to learning in their higher education journey, including active and experiential learning strategies. Moreover, this study confirms a positive correlation between simulation use and student engagement. Second, experiential learning techniques enhance knowledge retention and knowledge application. This was confirmed by the quasi-experimental research design and its findings. Pretests show that about one-third of students have an advanced understanding of the material before class discussion. Despite subsequent in-class explanations, most students could identify some key elements of Fisher and Ury's theory but not enough to qualify as being satisfactory. Posttests confirm that the simulation facilitated greater student learning of Fisher and Ury's theoretical framework and its applicability to real-world settings. As such, students possessed a deeper understanding of both theory and practice following the simulation.

The third implication is that simulations improve various primary and secondary skillsets students require to succeed in their careers. High Stakes Diplomacy prepares students for group-based and individual negotiations, allows students to become proficient in time management under crisis circumstances, and advances critical thinking and research skills while enabling players to build leadership and followership qualities. Role-playing enables students to apply theory-driven approaches to real-world diplomatic environments. Finally, while this study is based on the experiences of 13 students in one class, which limits its generalizability, it does affirm previous research findings that this type of educational milieu engenders a well-rounded, competition-oriented student capable of competing in the global environment today (see Grabinger et al. 1997).

Acknowledgements

Readers may find additional simulation materials at: <https://valdosta.academia.edu/ZacharyKarazsia>.

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