



Could the G7 climate club work? Lessons learned from climate coalitions

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Abstract

The recent reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are stark reminders of the urgency of tackling the climate crisis and the need to accelerate decarbonization. International cooperation is considered key to speeding up the transformations required to achieve the Paris Agreement goals. However, there is a growing gap between ambition and reality when it comes to goals such as reaching net zero emissions by 2050. Shortcomings in global climate governance have been exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has forced countries to rethink their climate and energy priorities. While these geopolitical developments may weaken climate cooperation, multilateral crises have occurred before and led to the development of mini-lateral forms of cooperation involving coalitions of smaller groups of countries. To strengthen cooperation further, "climate clubs" have for a number of years featured in debates as a way to increase climate ambition among small groups of actors. The German Government put forward a proposal to create an open climate club in August 2021 (BMF 2021). The establishment of "an open, cooperative Climate Club" was discussed at the G7 Summit in Germany in June 2022, and the G7 is now aiming to form a club of countries committed to stronger action on climate change by the end of the year (Politico 2022). The proposed climate club and the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism have increased interest in climate clubs as a way to complement other forms of climate cooperation, such as voluntary coalitions. However, there are also concerns about legitimacy, fairness and the feasibility of an effective climate club. This paper examines how climate and energy practitioners view the landscape of international climate cooperation, the advantages and disadvantages of voluntary climate coalitions and the feasibility of the club approach to accelerating climate action.



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Introduction¹

The Paris Agreement adopted in 2015 was a breakthrough in the international negotiations on climate change and widely regarded as a success for multilateralism. The Agreement marks a shift in climate cooperation through a combination of Nationally Determined Contributions and international monitoring, in which the pressure to ratchet up the ambition of national contributions over time is central (Falkner 2016). Despite the diplomatic success and new momentum on energy transition, the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports demonstrate once again how urgent the climate crisis is. Moreover, the two most recent global systemic shocks, the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have had serious implications and repercussions for climate action. The pandemic led actors to become more inward-facing and failed to realize hopes for a green recovery (Hans et al. 2022), while the war in Ukraine has increased mistrust among important actors. There is therefore a high degree of uncertainty about whether states will be able to rise to the level of ambition needed to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.

The slow progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions has led to calls for other ways to speed up climate action. The idea of climate clubs – a smaller group of actors with clearly defined targets and conditions for membership taking action outside the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – has long been a concept in

academia but lacked real-life examples. This has begun to change as the idea seems to be gaining momentum among governments. The European Union (EU) is taking serious steps to introduce a carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), and prominent practitioners are calling for the creation of an EU-US climate club. In August 2021, during the German G7 presidency, the then German Finance Minister, Olaf Scholz, proposed a climate club as a forum for close cooperation among ambitious actors but also open to cooperation to boost international climate action (BMF 2021). It was announced at the G7 Summit in Schloss Elmau, Germany on 26–28 June 2022 that a new climate club would be established by the end of the year (Politico 2022).

The proposed club will be an intergovernmental forum of high ambition, inclusive and open to other countries. A G7 statement issued after the summit noted that the climate club will be built on three pillars: “Advancing ambitious and transparent climate mitigation policies to reduce emissions intensities of participating economies on the pathway towards climate neutrality; transforming industries jointly to accelerate decarbonization; and boosting international ambition through partnerships and cooperation to encourage and facilitate climate action and to promote just energy transition” (G7 Statement on a climate club, 28 June 2022).

The establishment of the G7 climate club and the growing interest in climate clubs more generally raises various issues. While voluntary climate coalitions have

¹ This paper builds on Falkner et al 2022.



proliferated in recent years, they are not of the transformative kind that is depicted in the climate club literature (Falkner et al. 2022). Since no climate club has yet been created, we know very little about how they would work, the potential for this form of international cooperation to speed up climate action or how it would complement ongoing initiatives. To examine these important issues, and the main concerns raised about this form of international cooperation, this paper uses practitioners' views on climate coalitions to examine the potential roles climate clubs might play in accelerating climate ambitions, as well as the most important obstacles and opportunities. Answering these questions will improve our understanding of critical issues regarding the current landscape for international climate cooperation and the potential role of climate clubs therein.

The paper is based on interviews with academics and policymakers. In order to explore climate cooperation, we conducted 24 interviews with academics, policymakers and climate diplomats working at the national and international levels to address climate change. The interviewees are from all the world's regions, but a majority are from Europe. The semi-structured interviews consisted of a series of questions pertaining to achieving the Paris Agreement goals and the role of coalitions and clubs in this. The interviewees had an opportunity to reflect on the questions and raise issues that were not addressed. The interviews were carried out via Zoom between April and July 2020. While the interviews took place before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the answers offer insights into the evolving landscape for international climate cooperation and the

advantages and disadvantages of different ideas for strengthening climate action of relevance to ongoing efforts to form a climate club.

The results show that coalitions have important roles to play in the global climate change architecture, but that there is more disagreement on the idea of a climate club. The interviewees also identified a number of shortcomings in current approaches that if addressed could accelerate climate action. Before turning to the results, the next section provides an overview of the literature on climate clubs and coalitions. The final section makes policy recommendations.

Climate clubs and coalitions

While international negotiations on climate change have been taking place for over 30 years, they have been marked by gridlock and weak outcomes (Victor 2011). Climate clubs have been suggested as an alternative strategy in order to move climate action forward. The idea is that increased levels of ambition would be facilitated by vanguard actors taking the lead. This idea that smaller groups of actors should join together and pledge more ambitious targets features regularly as a way forward for climate action. Using economic theory as a point of departure, William Nordhaus suggests that effective climate clubs need clearly defined targets and conditions for membership, and could involve sanctions or penalties against non-members (Nordhaus 2015; see also Ott et al. 2016; van den Bergh 2017). It is, however, difficult to find a real-life climate club that adheres strictly to this definition, or ideal type.



Instead, recent years have seen a proliferation of climate coalitions that bring together countries and non-state actors to achieve accelerated transformation, such as the Climate Ambition Alliance and the Carbon Neutrality Coalition. Actors create coalitions and alliances to raise the level of ambition and see this as a way to accelerate decarbonization (Falkner et al. 2022). Many of these initiatives set off with great fanfare and rapidly increase their number of members. Some seem resilient, while others lose momentum and are rather short-lived.

The terms climate coalition and climate club are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, but the club concept originates from neoclassical economics, where a club is understood as a “consumption-ownership-membership arrangement”, or “economic arrangements where actors choose to participate for the material benefits that the membership confers” (Buchanan 1965 in Green 2015). In contrast, the literature on coalitions in international politics has focused on coalition formation, their inner workings, and how states have used coalitions to increase influence and reduce complexity in multilateral negotiations (see e.g. Druckman 2002).

The scholarship on climate clubs has been growing in recent years as it has become apparent that laggard countries undermine international cooperation on climate change as consensus is required at the UNFCCC. The argument is that it would be more promising to start off with a small group of “enthusiastic” countries that set ambitious targets and then implement measures against countries that are unwilling to join the club (Hovi et al. 2016; Victor 2011).

According to Hovi et al. (2016: 2), key factors in making such clubs successful would be: “the club’s ability to (1) provide a viable basis for cooperation among enthusiastic countries, (2) attract new members and (3) ensure that new and existing members alike contribute with considerable emissions reductions”. To reduce free-riding, a number of member-only benefits have been proposed, such as “a low-tariff zone for low-emission technologies, international linkage of properly designed emissions trading systems and border tax adjustments to combat leakage” (Hovi et al. 2016: 4).

Attempts by states to form club-like initiatives have helped to promote dialogue and implementation, but have not focused on significantly increasing ambition or supported transformational change (see e.g. Weischer et al 2012; Victor 2011). With the Paris Agreement now in place, the discussion has shifted to how such approaches can complement multilateral efforts and how they could contribute to real change. A central feature of the Paris Agreement is a ratchet mechanism that aims to pressure states to increase national contributions over time in order to achieve agreed goals. Decarbonization requires a range of actions from diverse actors (Bernstein and Hoffmann 2018: 190) and some actors to take the lead. In particular, the degree of transformation required calls for much deeper forms of international collaboration than the shallow forms the world has seen thus far. Recent studies show that by creating cooperative platforms for climate action, different actors can be induced to work together to arrive at more ambitious climate commitments (Bernstein and Hoffmann 2018; Chan et al. 2018).



Exploring the roles of coalitions in climate governance

We conducted our analysis in two steps. First, we looked at the need for increased international climate cooperation and provided an overview of the different forms of such cooperation. This overview is not exhaustive but is presented for illustrative purposes to show the different forms of collaboration that exist. Next, we investigated the roles of collaboration and demonstrated the possibilities and limitations of such approaches. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Are coalitions and clubs needed?

Throughout the interviews, the Paris Agreement was unsurprisingly singled out as a major milestone for international cooperation on climate change. When it came to identifying coalitions for collaboration on climate change, however, the interviewees highlighted quite a diverse set of networks, alliances and coalitions, such as negotiation groups, general climate coalitions and issue-specific coalitions. These coalitions discuss and promote carbon neutrality, emission reductions and renewables. Some are closely linked to the climate regime, while others operate outside of the UNFCCC.

Most of the interviewees cited the existence of a large number of ongoing initiatives and collaborations at different levels involving various actors. The ones most frequently mentioned by interviewees were the High Ambition Coalition, the NDC Partnership,

the Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA), the Friends of Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform (FFFSR), the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action and the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition. As the interviewees highlighted, there are no shortage of international initiatives that seek to address different aspects of climate change. Nonetheless, the interviewees expressed the need for even more international collaboration on climate change:

The Paris Agreement is really important as a global multilateral treaty that everyone has agreed to, well most countries have signed up to, and it kind of is the one political movement that people can gather around; and I think it's really important to continue engaging with the UNFCCC on the Paris Agreement process for that reason; but I don't think that alone is enough. I do think there is a need for more regional cooperation and perhaps thematic cooperation. (Interview 13)

While all the interviewees highlighted a need to increase international cooperation to accelerate implementation of the Paris Agreement, the type and scope of the cooperation suggested differed depending on the background of the interviewees. While interviewees from developed countries typically highlighted the need to strengthen international collaboration to bring down the market prices for clean technologies, including Carbon Capture and Storage and negative emission technologies, those from developing countries generally mentioned partnerships to assist with the financing of climate transitions, and to facilitate technology transfers and capacity building. However, even interviewees from small developed



countries and those reliant on fossil fuels emphasised the value of international collaborations to facilitate capacity building and knowledge sharing.

Several also emphasised the need to increasingly include other types of stakeholders in different types of collaborations, such as sub-national governments, industry and private finance, in order to mobilise ambitious actors and not allow institutional gridlock to slow implementation of the Paris Agreement. Thus, it is clear that voluntary coalitions are seen as a complement to the multilateral negotiations on climate change.

The roles and contributions of climate coalitions

Voluntary coalitions are believed to play a number of important roles in climate change governance: “Coalitions can work to promote dialogue, share best practices and new ideas, push for change in a joint manner, coordinate and accelerate implementation, and build momentum for global climate action” (Interview 21). The importance of cooperation in increasing ambition was also stressed: “And not only do I believe there is potential, I believe that unless we get to better, closer coordination, we will not, we will never deliver on higher ambition; higher ambition can only be delivered through that coordination” (Interview 12).

Global international cooperation on climate change has, however, suffered from low levels of ambition because the international negotiations rely on consensus among 195 states parties. Voluntary coalitions can advance action in a number of areas where consensus among the larger group would be

impossible. Coalitions could be more nimble because they can identify forms of action and not be impeded by having to be slowed down by the lowest common denominator (Interview 7). Or, as another interviewee pointed out:

In the year before Paris it was evident that we would have an agreement, but the level of ambition depended greatly on creating momentum through coalitions in different sectors, both through parties like the High Ambition Coalition with countries, but also building up different groups and working with different groups like business. Currently, it's also part of what we are trying to do entering the next phase, now that the Paris Agreement is in place and we need to ratchet up ambition even more so because of the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (Interview 5)

According to one interviewee, coalitions facilitate advancement of certain topics that would be difficult to achieve in a formal negotiating setting: “That facilitative role is really important because you've got to have the UNFCCC setting the rules to an extent but then you have to have places where the implementation actually happens and countries get together and go ‘well how do we actually do this?’” (Interview 13). Similarly, in the words of another interviewee:

[A] coalition by nature is like-minded parties or parties that have some common interests, even if they are not completely aligned. So that is an advantage that people tend to agree on, at least in general, about the direction or action for them to take, but maybe differ on the pace of that. So part of that is that there is



a great learning opportunity. You know, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. If someone has done this already, it is much easier and faster to learn from your counterparts in other regions – how they have dealt with a similar problem. So learning and sharing, but also fellowship or partnership are important – that you're not alone. You're not taking sort of untested messages or untested solutions. So that's all very important particularly to [the] stringent ambition part. (Interview 10)

Other interviewees emphasised that coalitions could also raise awareness, instil a sense of urgency and be a platform for actors at different levels, such as business or local government (Interview 8). When speaking generally about coalitions, one of the interviewees stated that: "I think from a level of facilitating potential policy learning, technical solutions as well as political solutions are quite helpful. I think these coalitions also help to shift the way that we frame energy transition problems and our discussion and understanding of them. And that's hugely helpful" (Interview 7).

More specifically on the role of the Powering Past Coal Alliance, the same interviewee stressed that it is a "useful tool for highlighting possible policy solutions that could help to support transitions in various countries. It can put some subtle pressure on countries as well, simply by [...] highlighting the support among peer countries for moving away from fossil fuels and moving away from coal" (Interview 7).

Another interviewee stressed how coalitions could be a platform for other actors than states, and that many of the coalitions

involve other stakeholders (Interview 16). The advantage of small coalitions is that they can work faster and set higher aims, while larger groups must accommodate the lowest common denominator.

Limitations

Nonetheless, the interviewees identified a number of challenges that voluntary coalitions face. First, there is the question of the permanence of coalitions. Several coalitions are "created in the spur of a COP or in the run-up to a meeting and put out a statement" (Interview 22), but these declarations do not impose any legal obligations on the signatories. Informal alliances built around specific opportunities, such as raising finance or common interests, are vulnerable to changes in those opportunities and therefore have little permanence. They also often rely on key people to keep the momentum going, which can be difficult to maintain across time:

Building a coalition I think has a lot to do with the people that you're working with and [...] trusting individuals and individual relationships; and those get hard to maintain over long periods, long distances and high turnover of some of these groups. [...] If your government changes but your negotiators don't change, then personal relationships can hold. If the government doesn't change and there's a long-term trajectory for the government and individuals hold, then shared values and long-term trajectories might hold it together. But if both are changing, and that's been my experience most of the time, then you hold for five years because enough of the elements hold but then you lose a couple of key people, a couple of the loudest voices or a couple of the best organized. Or sometimes...you haven't



lost the voice in the room but the two people in the background who were the people who were very good at doing the legwork of getting people on the same page and convening. I mean, the voice is only as good as the back-up. (Interview 12).

Second, and related to this point, coalitions require a high level of resources to be effective, which can be difficult to maintain. According to one interviewee, successful coalitions need to be put together purposefully and require “the right people along with the right incentives. But sometimes these groups are created in order to get a seat on the stage or a profile in a meeting. Then it doesn't really serve a purpose. And they are very labour-intensive; it takes a lot of work to put them together, to reach out, to get people to sign up” (Interview 22).

An example mentioned by several interviewees as having played a role in the past but had difficulties maintaining its momentum is the High Ambition Coalition. Interviewees linked this to a lack of staff and funding: “if you don't have any funding and you don't have some people who can follow up the ideas, then you can't get any further” (Interview 15).

Third, interviewees often mentioned that voluntary coalitions lack monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and that there is little follow-up. This makes the effectiveness of the coalitions on climate action difficult to assess. Interviewees also mentioned that the proliferation of climate initiatives makes it

important to build on existing initiatives rather than reinvent the wheel.

Finally, like other forms of international cooperation, coalitions have to make certain trade-offs linked to the quality of participation in the coalition, its level of ambition and its effectiveness. According to one interviewee: “the deeper the alignment, the less impactful it tends to be because then you are sort of preaching to the converted. But the less deep the alignment is, the more shallow that alliance tends to be and the easier it is for it to fall apart” (Interview 12).

Similarly, organisers of coalitions have to balance the aim and scope of the coalition with effectiveness: “effectiveness in expanding reach I sometimes think makes the pool a little shallow” (Interview 12). An example provided by one interviewee is the PPCA, which was launched by the British and Canadian governments at COP 23 in 2017. Initially, the idea was to have Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and EU member states sign up to phasing out coal by 2030, but the organisers had to rethink this when large coal users such as Germany set later deadlines for their coal phase-out. Germany was deemed a particularly important actor to have on board so the PPCA lowered its sights. Its website thus states that: “It also offers membership to national governments that are taking ambitious actions on coal phase-out (but that are not yet able to meet the 2030 and 2050 timeframes)”.²

There are therefore many pros and cons when choosing different coalition set-ups

² <https://poweringpastcoal.org/about/who-we-are>



and which actors to include. Some coalitions require active cooperation while others merely involve signing a declaration to signal an intent. The more active forms of cooperation require more resources and follow-up mechanisms to make them work and keep the momentum going, which can be difficult to achieve on a voluntary basis. Thus, forming coalitions in the first place and ensuring that they achieve their aims requires considerable efforts. According to one interviewee, “building these coalitions is extremely tedious and painful; you have to pitch the value-added to each one of the members and you have to show that you are serious; [...] it’s a very complicated diplomatic exercise” (Interview 22).

Another interviewee stressed the importance of asking what the added value is of a new coalition: “when there have been initiatives coming our way, which either countries or other kinds of actors want us to join, my first reaction has been: What is the added value of this particular coalition? What results can they bring? And how does it relate to other coalitions that are already out there? I think there are probably a couple of those that were launched with a great fanfare a few years ago that might be less lively nowadays” (Interview 21).

Despite the important role such coalitions appear to play, the drawbacks of voluntary coalitions are evident. This could mean that

Table 1 Climate coalitions: roles, contributions and limitations.

Roles	Contributions	Limitations
Promote dialogue	Facilitate advance of certain topics that would be difficult to achieve in a formal negotiating setting	Questionable stability of coalitions
Share best practices and new ideas		No legal obligations
Coordinate and accelerate implementation	Advance action and create momentum	Vulnerable to change
Advance and share learning	Work faster and set higher aims	Rely on key people to keep the momentum going
Raise awareness	Instil sense of urgency to act	Require resources to be effective
Platform for involving other stakeholders	Catalyst for change	Highly labour intensive
Help to shift the way we frame energy transition problems	Put subtle pressure on countries	Building these coalitions is extremely tedious
Tool for highlighting possible policy solutions that could help to support transitions	Highlight the support among peer countries for a move away from fossil fuels	Lack monitoring and enforcement mechanisms
		Effectiveness of the activities of coalitions difficult to assess
		Must balance the aim and scope of the coalition with effectiveness
		Crowded space: What’s the added value of this particular coalition?
		How does it relate to other coalitions that are already out there?

Source: Compiled from interview data.



the idea of a more comprehensive and stringent climate club might have some traction. Asked their opinions about the possibility that a climate club might help accelerate climate action, however, most interviewees (with a few exceptions) were unfamiliar with the term. This indicates that the climate club concept is still an academic one that is not well understood beyond the scholarly literature. When offered a description of a climate club and some of its key characteristics, many argued that the closest thing to that idea is currently the EU – especially given current discussions about introducing a carbon border tax. More generally, one interviewee stated that: “if you operate in a small group and that group is 80% of global emissions, I think it's a great idea” (Interview 11).

Others had doubts about the political feasibility of creating a climate club and some expressed concerns about its possible implications.

It has risk as well because you could end up in a situation where if I'm not part of the club then I'm not going to do anything or if you are part of the club and feel you are doing too much you don't need to provide support to developing countries that are not part of the club. So, it splits the efforts. I think it's fine to have coalitions; I think it's great and needed to have coalitions, both with private sector stakeholders and our parties, as a means for a race-to-the-top mechanism if you will. But if you close it and make it stringent as a club, I'm sure it will bring benefits to those in the club, but I'm not sure that it will bring benefits overall to the topic. (Interview 5)

Interviewees from developing countries raised concerns about possible distraction

from other policy issues if they were to focus all their efforts on the climate agenda or risk being penalised or being left behind. One interviewee from a developed country expressed the need to ensure that a climate club did not lead to protectionism. The lack of consensus from key actors might also lead some countries with differing agendas to work to undermine the climate club, perhaps by forming their own club, thereby reducing effectiveness. The general reaction to the climate club idea was that it is not a silver bullet: “I guess no one coalition or club is going to be the answer but it will be a piece of the puzzle because that's just how it works” (Interview 13).

Conclusions

While the 2015 Paris Agreement has provided a basis for collective climate action, rapidly increasing climate ambition and action around the world are currently absent. Following finalization of the Paris rulebook at COP 26, the world now moves to an implementation stage where ramping-up domestic climate action takes the front seat. Although COP 26 raised the level of climate ambition, the world remains far from on track to keep global temperature rise within 1.5°C. The Glasgow Climate Pact acknowledges the global emission gap emerging from current pledges and calls on countries to raise their national targets for COP 27 by the end of 2022. It was also decided that a mitigation work programme be established to scale up mitigation ambition and implementation. At COP27 Parties will negotiate the details of this work programme with the aim to close the emissions gap. How climate initiatives,



coalitions and clubs will fit into this work will be of great importance.

Coalitions of smaller groups of frontrunner actors have played an important part throughout the history of climate diplomacy. It is becoming increasingly clear, particularly in the current political context, that coalitions of ambitious actors will be important to driving change in the global climate architecture. Nonetheless, there are still important gaps in our understanding of these forms of collaboration.

This paper has taken the first steps to improve understanding of the roles and shortcomings of such climate coalitions.

From our initial empirical investigation, we have observed that additional forms of collaboration will be necessary to complement the Paris Agreement in order to achieve decarbonization. If successful, these coalitions will open up new opportunities to heighten ambition and put pressure on other actors. As discussed above, they could fill several important roles in this context. In outlining the shortcomings of these voluntary coalitions, we note that some might be easier to overcome, while overcoming others will depend on resources and structures. Our first results indicate that the idea of a more rigorous climate club is still quite an abstract idea.

Implications and policy recommendations

- International climate cooperation needs to be broadened and deepened in order to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement, and there is ample scope for countries with ambitious climate goals to take the lead in forming more effective collaborations.
- The Mitigation Work Programme to be negotiated at COP27 should consider the wider climate governance landscape of climate initiatives and coalitions and seek to harvest synergies through strengthened coordination and accountability mechanisms.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine will provide impetus for many countries to rethink their energy policies, which could be seen as a window of opportunity for climate clubs.
- A transformative climate club as depicted in the economic literature does not exist today, but lessons could be learned from climate coalitions.
- Climate clubs in their purest form will be difficult to implement; issues of legitimacy and fairness will need to be considered seriously before a club could be effective.
- Any future climate club (based on the G7 discussions or other suggestions) would need to navigate the complex landscape of the climate initiatives that already exist.
- From a feasibility perspective, the idea of a single climate club with costs for non-members might be less effective than a facilitative club that combines different coalitions under one umbrella and helps non-members to take steps towards membership.

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Interviews

Interview 5, 3 April 2020

Interview 7, 7 April 2020

Interview 8, 17 April 2020

Interview 10, 20 April 2020

Interview 11, 20 April 2020

Interview 12, 20 April 2020

Interview 13, 30 April 2020

Interview 15, 18 May 2020

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Interview 21, 13 July 2020

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