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“Discreet dominance”: peacekeeping deployments and international security force assistance, and their impact on civil–military relations in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The Nepal Army has never attempted a coup or overtly obstructed transfer of power between different governments. Yet, the Nepal Army remains the most powerful institutions in Nepal, continues tower over civilian institutions, and prevails when civil–military relations are contested. This article explores the explanations for this “discreet dominance” of the military. While extant scholarship has focused on domestic variables to account for the military’s covert dominance, this article highlights the paradoxical effect of two *external* factors which contribute to the military’s discreet dominance: *security assistance from international partners* ranging from Western states as well as regional partners, India and China and *increased demand and opportunities for UN peacekeeping deployments*. Tracing the causal mechanism of the phenomenon, the article highlights how, on the one hand, prohibitions associated with troop contribution to UN’s peacekeeping missions, and security force assistance, have pressurized the Nepal Army to adapt some form of civilian control, notably the “anti-coup norm” leading it not to overtly intervene in civilian affairs through coups or interference in transfer of power. However, on the other hand, such external factors bestow significant political, economic and institutional benefits which enables the military to dominate its civilian counterparts and contributes to deterioration in civil–military relations.

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1. Introduction

Unlike many South Asian states, Nepal, the oldest nation-state in South Asia, has never in its modern history seen a coup waged directly by the military. Nor have the military openly obstructed any transfer of democratic power. The September 2025 protests led by Gen Z students and activists, which resulted in the collapse of the government, have intensified scrutiny on the role of the Nepal Army, with citizens questioning the army’s absence during critical moments when the parliament and Supreme Court were engulfed in flames. A recent investigation has raised alarm about the army’s effectiveness in handling the situation (Khabarhub 2026). Despite such concerns, the military has

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continued to remain the most dominant institution in Nepal (S. Sharma 2017), and in periods of civil–military contestation, the military continues the triumph. Since 2005, Nepal undertook a decade-long UN-supported peace process to address the Maoist insurgency, which prioritized “democratization of the military” and “civilian control of the military” as core agendas. Yet the military’s institutional autonomy and prerogatives have only increased since (S. Sharma 2017). How might we make sense of this “discreet dominance” of the military in Nepal?

While peculiar in South Asia, Nepal is emblematic of a broader trend in civil–military relations globally. Although the incidence of military regimes and coups is on the decline, militaries continue to wield substantial political influence in other discreet forms. These include by acting as key veto player of political regimes and tending “to use more discreet and concealed channels to influence politics” (Brooks and Pion-Berlin 2022; Croissant, Eschenauer, and Kamerling 2016; Khisa and Day 2020). Such shifts in forms of military’s dominance in politics have also ensured that coups can no longer be the benchmark for understanding civil–military relations.

In the scholarship on civil–military relations, various push and pull factors, and internal and external have been used to analyse how militaries navigate civil–military relations. The article inductively uses the case study of Nepal to argue that alongside multiple internal factors, two “external” factors – security force assistance (SFA) and opportunities for troop contribution for UN peacekeeping missions – have been central in enabling the military to reject coups and instead dominate discreetly on issues related to civilian control. Peacekeeping deployment and SFA, on the one hand, directly and indirectly have pushed for the Nepal Army to adapt some form of civilian control which has taken the form of the “anti-coup norm.” However, the training, financing, and legitimacy given by both these mechanisms have strengthened to the extent that it has pushed the military to dominate its civilian counterparts. In other words, peacekeeping deployments and SFA have enabled a paradox – while they have been successful in pushing the anti-coup norm – they have invertedly promoted discreet forms of dominance. In discussing these, the article brings the scholarship on civil–military relations in conversations with two nascent bodies of work – unintended impact of peacekeeping deployments on troop contributing countries (M. Adhikari 2020; Aning and Edu-Afful 2013; Aoi, De Coning, and Thakur 2007; Hunt 2017; Tull 2018), and SFA (Dwyer 2021; Wilén 2022; Wilén and Dehaene 2020). While these bodies of work remain separate, Nepal as a case can bridge these strands of scholarship. Here, it needs to be noted that the purpose is not to draw a direct causation between discreet dominance of the military and peacekeeping deployments, and SFA, but to outline causal mechanisms and nexus between them through an in-depth case study.

Empirically Nepal, serves as a good case study to explore how external factors like peacekeeping and SFA impacts civil–military relations. First, Nepal’s civil–military relations, stands as an atypical case for civil–military relations in South Asia, the focus of this Special Issue. Unlike its South Asian neighbors – Pakistan, and Bangladesh – Nepali politics, has not been defined by coups or any overt political role of the military. But it also stands different to India, which has historically privileged civilian control over the military, with military’s civilian control exercised through a civilian bureaucracy (Mukherjee 2019), making Nepal civil–military relations marked by “discreet dominance” of the military a regional anomaly (G. Thapa and Sharma 2010). Such discreet

dominant, where the Nepal Army dominated politics indirectly by supporting the monarchy, which boasts of a 200-year-long history, also led questions about security sector reform, democratization of the Nepal Army, to be at the heart of the long-drawn peace process, supported by the UN (Martin 2012). Second, Nepal has also consistently been one of the highest peacekeeping troop contributors. In fact, as Nepal's own civil war raged, the Nepal Army served many parts of Africa and Asia with troops. Yet, only very lately has the unintended impact of peacekeeping deployments on civil–military relations has started being appraised both in the scholarly as well as policy community in Nepal (Dahal 2017; Gautam 2018). Third, and lesser, understood, is the fact that Nepal, has also been a key recipient of SFA, both from its global powers like the US, EU, UK, but also regional powers like India and China. This SFA increased during the Maoist insurgency which raged the country between 1996 and 2006.

Before proceeding, the article defines civil–military relations as the interaction between the leaders of the armed forces and political elites occupying the key national government positions in the state (Croissant et al. 2010). Further, while the very definition of being expanded to include civilian control, efficiency, and effectiveness (T. C. Bruneau and Matei 2008), the article takes a narrower approach to focus largely focuses on the issue of civilian-control – the dominant aspect in the study of civil–military relations but also one which is most contested avenue in developing states like Nepal. Building on Beliakova's work, the article relies on a broad definition of civilian control as a power balance between civilian authorities and the military in which civilians dominate (Beliakova 2021)

After this brief introduction, the article proceeds to conceptually situate the idea of discreet dominance within the scholarship on civil–military relations. Focusing on external influences on civil–military relations, this section situates troop deployment for UN peacekeeping missions, and security force assistance as two key external variables enabling discreet dominance and outlines the causal mechanisms for this phenomenon. The article then moves to discuss the Nepal case in detail, and tests the causal mechanisms outlined in the prior section, before moving to the conclusion.

2. External influences on civil–military relations and the enabling the rise of “discreet dominance”

The central argument of the paper is how external factors, notably peacekeeping deployment and security assistance, have enabled “discreet dominance” of the military. As depicted in [Figure 1](#), the causal logic holds that security assistance from international partners and opportunities for peacekeeping deployments brings important benefits for military institutions in the form of training, equipment, and financial compensation. Such benefits, however, have paradoxical effect on civil–military relations – on the one hand, as peacekeeping deployments and security force assistance are conditioned by respect to liberal norms of civilian supremacy, it has enabled the Nepal Army to refrain from any overt intervention, but over the long-term it has also strengthened the dominance of the military. The result of such contradicting impulses has led to “discreet dominance.”

In unpacking the phenomenon of external influence enabling discreet dominance, the article speaks to two growing strands of work in civil–military relations: i) multiple ways

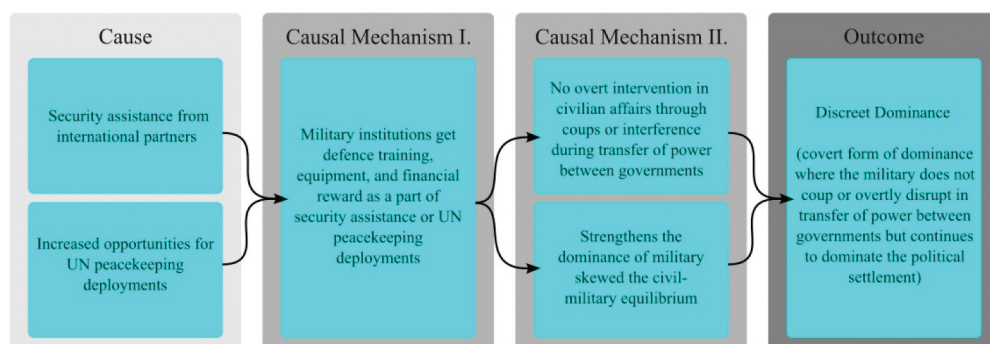


Figure 1. Mechanism demonstrating the impact of international security assistance and the opportunities for UN peacekeeping deployments on civil-military relations.

in which civilian control is challenged beyond more overt forms such as “coups,” and ii) external influence on civil–military relations, notably in developing countries. On external influence, the article focuses on further two variables of how opportunities for peacekeeping deployments or troop contribution and the security force assistance, which has emerged in different tracks, and is discussed by a small but insightful body of scholarship. Below, I situate the conceptual underpinning of the article, within the discussion of the two strands of scholarship on civil–military relations.

2.1. Civilian- military relations: challenges to civilian control beyond “coups”

Civil–military relations broadly concern the relationship between the wider society and the military, but more narrowly, are the “relationship between the civilian government and the military” (Born et al. 2006). While there have been calls to broaden the understanding of civil–military relations, to include, questions of effectiveness and efficiency, the issue of democratic control of the military or how military can respect civilian supremacy continues to be the dominant theme (T. C. Bruneau and Matei 2008). More specifically, civilian control has often been conceptualized across three domains, including, i) *institutional control mechanisms*, which refers to the institutions in place to control the instruments of security (legal basis, ministries of defence, committees in parliaments with authority over policy and budgets, national security councils, and officer promotion processes); ii) *oversight of the military*, where civilians actually keep track of what the armed forces or other security forces do; are if they in fact following the direction and guidance they receive; and iii) *professional norms* which refers to whether the security institutions have been recruited, educated, trained, promoted, and the like to have internalized the previous two control mechanisms, and thus to indeed act in accord with the goals of the civilians (T. C. Bruneau and Matei 2008). Despite the broader conceptualization of civilian control, studies on democratization and civilian control of the military, in turn, implicitly equate civilian control with the absence of military coups or the direct takeover of executive power by the military (Croissant et al. 2010). Accordingly, coups have evolved to the core indicator to appraise civilian control of the military or military dominance in politics more broadly.

Global trends have, however, necessitated a rethinking of coups as the sole indicator of civilian control or civil–military relations more broadly, on at least four accounts. First, globally while military regimes and coups were declining, 41% of all regimes, between 1999 and 2012, continued to see the military wield substantial political influence, and be a key political veto-player, even when they do not control the government directly (Kuehn 2017). Second, empirically, it was being argued that the absence of coups might just as well be understood as an indicator for the military enjoying a high degree of political influence vis-à-vis civilian authority. This is truer for newer democracies, where control mechanisms for the military are not robust (T. C. Bruneau and Matei 2008). In many contexts, military influence occurs behind the scenes through formal and informal prerogatives, political guarantees, and wide-ranging institutional autonomies. These might not threaten the survival of democracy per se, but have deleterious effects on democratic quality, accountability and civil liberties (Kuehn 2017, 790). Third, external and internal contexts in which the military operate is changing, which has implied that classically held notions of what constitutes overstep by the military is also shifting. For instance, contemporary militaries are mainly (with some notable exceptions) involved in are peacekeeping, fighting terrorists and insurgents, supporting civilians in natural and man-made disasters, and military diplomacy rather than inter-state wars (T. C. Bruneau 2018) – all of which brings forth new areas of engagement, and possible contestation with civilian authorities. Lastly, the international context, has tended to promote an anti-coup norm, which, despite the absence of consistency, is well-entrenched and has put a pressure on the military to avoid coups to beget international legitimacy (Tansey 2017). However, while the pressure to avoid coups remains, its monitoring is rather limited to “coups,” and thus many militaries have successfully created a facade of civilian supremacy, through sham elections, informal prerogatives, to hide their dominance and escape international prohibitions (Tansey 2017).

Owing to these factors a growing body of scholarship has now pivoted to unpacking various ways in which civilian control erode and the various forms in which militaries “dissent” beyond coups (Beliakova 2021; Brooks and Pion-Berlin 2022; Hundman 2021). For instance, Brooks and Pion-Berlin categorize forms of dissent as into five categories – public outreach to influence general citizens or specific groups indirectly increasing costs to political leader for pursuing a policy; alliance building and lobbying to enhanced the military’s leverage over political leaders; exploiting information asymmetries by concealing or delaying information which can affect policy advice and decision-making and implementation; exploiting control over material and human resources leading to use or withholding the use of force; and controlling the administering of the military organization (Brooks and Pion-Berlin 2022). Similarly, Beliakova categorizes erosion of civilian control through mechanisms such as competition, insubordination, and deference, based on study of civil–military relations across variety of regime types, including, autocracies etc. (Beliakova 2021). Hundman, in turn, creates a typology of dissent as defiance, refinement, grudging obedience, and exit, though such categorization is based on individual military personnel, rather than military as an organization (Hundman 2021). In sum, an emerging body of work has sought to decenter the focus on “coups” by looking at coercive and non-coercive, ways in which the military might obstruct civilian control or influence policy, often covertly or behind the scenes. Discreet dominance of the military

in Nepal, as the article, can be read within this broader trend of military's non-coercive and covert dominance, relative to civilian authorities.

2.2. External influence on civil–military relations: unintended effect of peacekeeping deployments and security assistance

Another scholarly gap is the limited discussions on external factors that shape civil–military relations. The scholarship on civil–military relations has a voluminous body of work on the factors that influence aspects of civilian control. These have largely focused on *internal factors*, including, degree of professionalism in the officer corps, degree of institutionalization within civilian society; legitimacy of civilian government (Huntington 1957), extent of democratic consolidation (Baburkin et al. 1999), the degree of mass public support for emerging civilian structures; presence or threat of civil war, the nature of the domestic political system, and the distribution of wealth (Feaver 1999), and the extent to which civilians were able to develop expertise on defence matters (Share 1996). The limited discussion in the scholarship on external factors that impact civil military relations has largely focused on international pressure through targeted aid and norms. The scholarship highlights how the international promotion of “no-coup” norm as a part of the wider global democracy promotion efforts by leading powers, such as the United States and members of the European Union have propagated a particular liberal understanding of civil–military relations focused on civilian control (T. Bruneau and Trinkunas 2006).

A small and insightful body of work however is beginning to analyse intended and unintended ways in which peacekeeping deployments and security force assistance impacts civil–military relations, asserting the role of external factors (Berg 2020; Jowell 2018; Matisek 2020; Rolandsen, Dwyer, and Reno 2021). A related discussion highlights how programs like security sector reform (SSR), introduced to multiple African security institutions to strengthen the coercive capacities of African states, which includes SFA is increasingly seen as external factor impacting civil military relations, often in unintended ways (Jackson 2011; Khisa and Day 2020).

2.2.1. Peacekeeping deployments as an external factor shaping civil–military relations

The scholarship on how peacekeeping deployments have inadvertently impacted civil–military relations in troop contributing countries (TCC), many of whom are from fragile and conflict-affected themselves is growing. This turn in the scholarship has followed the changes in the very composition of contemporary peacekeeping deployments. In contemporary peace operations, the contribution of Western states and middle powers like Canada, Sweden, and Norway is being replaced by developing countries, including South Asian states, like Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who provide over two-thirds of the peacekeeping troop on the ground (Sotomayor 2014b). With such changes, the scholarship has also started mapping not only the impact of peacekeeping in host-countries but also intended and unintended impact in troop-contributing countries. Scholars have mapped how TCCs sending peacekeepers for UN missions had led security institutions to engage in domestic rebellions (Dwyer 2015), subverting prospects of

security sector reform (SSR) (Wilén 2018), and even the reinforcement of patrimonial systems (Jowell 2018).

In linking peacekeeping deployments to civil–military relations, two contradicting rationales are floated. On the one hand, some scholars outline the positive effects of peacekeeping participation on the domestic politics of an authoritarian regime, notably on military’s respect for the idea of civilian supremacy (Albrecht 2020; Kathman and Melin 2017; Magnus 2018). For instance, peacekeeping deployments are seen to enable militaries from TCCs to improve the degree of democratic control over the armed forces through mechanisms, including, distraction from internal preoccupations by an important external mission; internal and external signalling of progress in democratization; and “socialization,” with troops from consolidated democracies (Kenkel 2021). Similarly, Magnus outlines how economic rationale of the military – fearing the loss of UN reimbursement funds – will lead the and thus avoid visible acts of military insubordination, such as coup attempts which risks future participation in UN peacekeeping at risk (Magnus 2018). Taking the logic further, Albrecht outlines four mechanisms through which peacekeeping helps civil–military relations at home for TCCs: the deployment of troops for peacekeeping abroad presents obstacles for the coordination of coup plots at home; allows for governments to allocate material resources to meet officers’ economic grievances; enhances corporate institutionalization through training program; and cultivates professional ethos which aid democratization (Albrecht 2020). Using the case of Ghana, Banini, Powell and Yekple outline how increase in Ghana’s peacekeeping contributions during the 1990s “directly accompanied the transition to and consolidation of democratic rule, complete with multiple peaceful transfers of executive authority to the political opposition” (Banini, Powell, and Yekple 2020, 236).

Yet, others negate such positive correlations to outline that peacekeeping does little to strengthen ideas of civilian control and democracy. In fact, the very motivation of peacekeeping can range from political, security-related, economic, institutional, and normative – all of which contributed to strengthening the military (Bellamy and Williams 2013). Such varied benefits accorded by peacekeeping deployments might inadvertently negatively impact civil–military relations, given the building military capacity for peacekeeping purposes, opportunities for training and professionalization of the military, international legitimacy given to the military, and financial benefits to reimburse for peacekeeping (Beswick 2010; Wilén, Birantamiye, and Ambrosetti 2018). Sotomayor highlights how the increased involvement of Brazil and Uruguay in multilateral peace operations did not restrict the power of their militaries. It did not improve transparency and accountability, empower civilians, persuade the armed forces to democratize or to acquiesce, or fully reorient officers away from their interest in domestic politics (Sotomayor 2014b, 194). Similarly, Dwyer argues that peacekeeping missions have instead prompted army mutinies in at least 10 countries in Africa (Dwyer 2018). Highlighting the divergent impact of peacekeeping deployments in troop contributing countries, some like Sotomayor and González Guyer and Jenne attribute the impact to be contingent also on the involvement and expertise of civilian authorities in shaping the discussions on peacekeeping deployments (González Guyer and Jenne 2021). Similarly, Cunliffe highlights how changing forms of peacekeeping might socialize militaries of TCCs to authoritarianism. He outlines how the increase of peacekeeping missions focused on stabilization and counterinsurgency exposes militaries to authoritarian

practices, and the robust use of force in these UN stabilization missions tends to strengthen military autonomy from civilian oversight (Cunliffe 2018).

Despite the evidence, a structural problem has been the absence of prioritization or a robust policy at the UN level to monitor how peacekeeping deployments might be subverting notions of civilian supremacy domestically in TCCs, beyond looking at military-led coups (M. Adhikari 2020; Zaman and Biswas 2014). Instead, the UN's vetting process is based on self-evaluation checklists conducted by TCCs themselves (Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2012). The development in Bangladesh is a case in point. In 2006, the Bangladeshi military was said to have installed a technocratic government to monitor elections rather than take powers themselves after the UN stated that "if the government went ahead with its controversial election plans and the Army allowed this to happen, it would lose its lucrative UN peacekeeping operations" (Zaman and Biswas 2014, 324). However, while the military did not overtly interfere and take executive power like in the past, the military continued to pull strings "behind the scene" (Zaman and Biswas 2014). Such sole focus on macro-politics of coups has also meant that the UN has looked away from discreet forms of dominance, including Bangladeshi Army's record in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where it has been responsible for gross human rights violation but continues to enjoy impunity for its actions (Ahmed 2014).

2.2.2. Security force assistance and civil–military relations

Security Force Assistance (SFA) programs, which involve twin components of training and equipping of a foreign armed force to increase the state coercive capacity, and instilling respect for human rights, democracy, and civilian control in the military has become an increasingly common form of intervention into conflict-prone states and mark a major shift in global security provision (Rolandsen, Dwyer, and Reno 2021). The failure of large-scale interventions, and the accompanied decline in domestic appetite in the West to provide large US ground-force commitments intensified SFA through which Western militaries could train and equip troops in fragile states and withdraw with some state security capacity to fight insurgents (Gates 2010). In practise, SFA along with arming and equipping, also incorporates efforts to transform civil–military relations, including democratization and respect for human rights (Berg 2020). There are however questions about how effective SFA can be in fragile states (Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker 2018).

Scholars have also proffered on the unintended effect of SFA on civil–military relations. Of the two core components of SFA, Savage and Caverley highlight how while the instilling of liberal norms of human rights and civilian control can work both ways (positive for civilian control only when there is a strong model of normative socialization transformation, which current models of SFA do not embed), training of security forces increases the military's power relative to the civilian regime resulting in greater coup propensity (Savage and Caverley 2017). Given its focus on the militaries and the security apparatus, SFA strengthens parts of a fragmented system that may not serve the population or the stability of the state as a whole but certain elite groups. Militaries and political elites receiving SFA have incentives to subvert SFA for their own purposes, while simultaneously engaging in corrupt or predatory behaviours that feed the very instability that SFA may be trying to address (Knowles and Matisek 2019, 15). Discussing the

unintended impact of SFA, Jowell argues that by providing patrimonial military institutions with significant external resources such as training centers, SFA can actively exacerbate internal patrimonial dynamics (Jowell 2018). Increased western emphasis on making African militaries more lethal and combat effective – in the absence of broader developmental assistance – merely masks (and reinforces) the institutional problems that lead to poor governance (Matisek 2020).

Further, the international competition to provide SFA, led by Western states but also many non-Western emerging and regional states, with little coordination between them, muddles the objectives of SFA (Marsh and Rolandsen 2021). In fact, China and Russia have filled the gap created by the decrease in SFA in Africa in the last one decade. And while Western states and donors push through liberal notions of civilian supremacy as a part of the wider package of SFA, Russia, and China do not, which cumulatively bring conflicting visions of world order and competing interests in fragile states (Matisek 2020).

To sum, inferences from different bodies of work on civil–military relations lead us to infer that while coups might be decreasing, military continue to dominant the political settlement through a host of institutional and economic prerogatives. And troop contribution to UN peacekeeping missions, and SFA can further contribute to these prerogatives by bringing training, legitimacy and economic opportunities to the militaries, and skewing the balance in civil–military relations. Both these inferences have played out, in Nepal, as will be detailed in the next section.

3. Civil–military relations in Nepal: a historic appraisal

The study of civil–military relations in Nepal, however, needs to be appraised within the wider historic political developments. Nepal has jostled between swiftly changing regime types: a decade of fragile experiment with democracy (1950–1960), followed by an abrogation of the democratic framework and three decades of guided democracy or the “Panchayat” system under the King’s executive rule (1960–1990); followed by restoration of multiparty democracy in the 1990 (Whelpton 2005), a civil war since 1996 waged by the Maoist insurgents; intermittent episodes of authoritarian monarchy between 2001 and 2005, and a peace process since 2006, which also abolished the monarchy. With this context of every-changing regime types, and unsteady coalitions, a core feature has been the tussle for power between the monarch backed by the Army and the democratic political parties. Until 2006, it served powerbase for the monarchy, and the intermittent authoritarian regime unleashed by the Kings (Dixit 2011). For much of its contemporary history, the Nepal Army, which played a key role in the unification of the country, had been associated with the monarchy, and seen as the King’s Army (I. Adhikari 2015).

During the Panchayat rule (until 1990), the monarch sought to consolidate the control of the military further – formally, by taking the role of the supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Army and informally, by cultivating loyalties in senior positions and appointing retired army officers in civil administration (Nepali and Subba 2005). Even the new constitutional upheld in 1990 which marked the end of the King-led Panchayat rule ended and return of democratic system had little bearing on the Nepal Army. The Constitution of 1990 while institutionally placed under the Ministry of Defence, the King continued as the supreme commander of the Army with veto on its mobilization

and demobilization (G. Thapa and Sharma 2010). The uneasy relationship between civilian authorities and military institutions has existed since then. The absence of resources, capacity, and expertise in the Ministry of Defence (MOD), further inhibits civilian forces from overseeing the Army properly (S. Ghimire 2017). The Army even then lobbied to be under the commandship of the King rather than democratic parties. Accordingly, in the many tussles of power between the King and the democratic parties, the Nepal Army's support to the King has been a deciding factor for the triumph of the King. The NA also historically has embodied the exclusive trait of the Nepali state – with traditional leadership largely coming from Chettri clan closely associated with the ruling class, and abysmal representation of marginalized groups like Madhesis or women (Jha 2014).

The start of the civil war, waged by Maoist insurgents, in 1996 impacted both the role of the military, as well as its relationship with civilian counterparts. Over the period of the civil war, not only was had the Nepal Army increased in size, from 45,000 to 95,000 between 2001 and 2006. Such increase did not commensurate with that of the Ministry of Defence, which has a formal mandate to manage the 96,000-strong Army, but is staffed by only 50 civil servants (Pangeni 2016). Further, the NA's disproportionate use of force, unleashing an unparalleled scale of violence during the insurgency contributed significantly to the overall death toll of 17,000 lives, and the disappearance of over 1300 people. The scale of violence led Nepali civil society groups, as well as the international community, to call for international monitoring of the human rights situation and a humanitarian response (Donini and Sharma 2014).

In 2006, through an order of the interim constitution, Nepal also transitioned from a monarchy to republicanism, abolishing the monarchy. The changed context of 2006 further meant that the Nepal Army had lost its core political patron and had to imbibe agendas of the peace process, including principles of civilian supremacy. Other changes brought forth by the interim constitution included the change in name from the Royal Nepal Army was changed to Nepal Army (removing the prefix of Royal to mark its disassociation with monarchy) and NA was brought under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister (later changed to President) upholding the spirit of civilian supremacy (Wagle and Jackson 2015). To the Maoist, more had to be done to address the elite composition of the Army, and this could be done by integrating of former Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army – an agenda also encoded into the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Jha 2014). Despite changes in regimes, and the end of the conflict, patterns of military's dominance persisted, and only intensified. Below, the article traces the causal mechanisms, described in [Figure 1](#), in the empirical case of Nepal.

3.1. Cause: security force assistance and UN peacekeeping deployments

Nepal has a long history of defence partnerships and SFA from other Western states such as US, UK, along with regional partners like India and China. SFA from both Western and regional sources increased during the civil war, significantly exacerbating the asymmetry in resources between civilian institution – the Ministry of Defence and the Nepal Army. The peace agreement had constrained Nepal's procurement of weapons, which brought a thaw in SPA. However, since 2012, after the completion of the process of

integration of Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army as a part of the peace process, SPA has resumed and escalated.

Given that volume and scope of SFA has been broader with regional powers, it warrants more discussion. Historically, Nepal's unique geography has meant that its SFA and broader defence cooperation was centered on India and China and not Western states (Mehta 2006). India's security concerns which tended to see the Himalayas as a barrier and Nepal as potential buffer between the Indian subcontinent and China has led it to invest substantively on strengthening security institutions in Nepal, including the Nepal Army (Bhasin 2005). The origins of Nepal's enhanced SFA can be attributed to the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between India and Nepal, which posits India as the principal provider of arms and armaments for Nepal, and restrict Nepal's imports of arms from non-Indian sources without Indian agreement (Nayak 2010). A number of defense personnel from Nepal Army attend training courses in various Indian Army training institutions, exercises like the Indo-Nepal Battalion-level Joint Military Exercise are conducted alternately in India and in Nepal (Embassy of India, Nepal n.d.). The Armies of India and Nepal also have a fraternal arrangement – where with a tradition of conferring “honorary general” designation to each other's chiefs. Over the years, SFA become more institutionalized with defense cooperation, weapons supply, and training for the NA, making security cooperation the most integral component of state–state relations between the two countries (Jha 2014).

Similar to India, China's engagement until 2006 was centered largely state-to-state, with Beijing backing the monarchy (Jha 2014). Post 2006, with Nepal transitioning to a republican state, a core area of Nepal–China relationship was military cooperation including, training, equipment supply, joint exercises, scholarships for Nepali military personnel in Chinese military universities, and high-profile visits (Bogati and Strasheim 2019; Solanki 2018). Other than the NA, China has also invested in infrastructural support, by building the Academy of the Nepal Armed Police Force.

Similarly, Nepal's peacekeeping contribution dates back to the late 1950s and Nepal Army has since served in 44 peacekeeping missions (Nepal Army n.d.). As of May 2022, Nepal was listed as the second highest troop contributor to peacekeeping operations with 5790 personnel deployed, most from the Nepal Army (United Nations Peacekeeping n.d.). Peacekeeping deployments for Nepal are also key to its foreign policy articulation, and a demonstration of its commitment to multilateralism. As a former Foreign Minister outlined “Through participation in UN peacekeeping, Nepal has earned an international repute as a country committed to upholding the principles as stipulated in the UN Charter” highlighting how peacekeeping is key to international legitimacy for Nepal (Gyawali 2021). The National Security Policy of Nepal 2016 asserts guides that military diplomacy and peacekeeping are crucial elements that complements Nepal's foreign policy (S. Thapa 2019). The government of Nepal has pledged to commit up to 10,000 peacekeepers to the UN, if the UN requests support (Nepal Army, n.d.). The fact that Nepal continued to send troops abroad even when the country was itself mired in a civil war demonstrates the centrality of UN peacekeeping deployments in Nepal (Sotomayor 2014a).

3.2. Causal mechanism 1: military institutions get defence training, equipment, and financial reward as a part of security assistance or UN peacekeeping deployments

SFA and rewards for contributing troops for UN peacekeeping missions has ensured that the Nepal Army has been continuously supplied with training, equipment, and financial benefits.

Throughout the conflict period in Nepal, until 2005, one arena where regional powers like India converged with Western states like the United States and United Kingdom was SFA. Citing the Nepal Army's absence of expertise on counter-insurgency, the United States, United Kingdom, and India provided lethal or non-lethal military assistance to Nepal, including equipment and military training (A. Adhikari 2014). The UK also provided extensive in-country training for Nepal Army, including training in bomb-disposal, intelligence gathering and human rights training, with many officers having received training at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, UK (Amnesty International 2005). The scale of SFA made the security forces almost completely dependent on foreign weapon imports as well as military assistance and training to sustain their operations (Human Rights Watch 2004). Alongside, the budgetary allocation for the army rose from less than a third of security sector expenditure in 1995–96 to nearly two-thirds in 2005–06 (S. Sharma 2017).

However, after King Gyanendra's royal coup in 2005 halted the military assistance from such nations. During this harsh time, when the Nepal Army lacked defense supplies, China bestowed Nepal with military assistance worth \$1 million (Mulmi 2021). Following China's initial backing, the defense agreement struck between Nepal and China in December 2008 was noteworthy in that China pledged to help modernize the NA with USD 2.6 million in aid and prepared the path for high-level military and civilian personnel to visit Nepal. Further, in December 2009, China agreed to assist Nepal army with the supply of "non-lethal" hardware that includes logistics and training (Paudel 2022).

Similarly, the UN's reimbursements for Nepal's peacekeeping contributions have ensured training opportunities for the Nepal Army, as well as ensured significant financial rewards for the Nepal Army as an institution, as well as individual soldiers (Bhattarai 2013). A Nepali soldier receives four to five times higher pay on a UN peacekeeping mission than the standard salary in Nepal. Further, the UN also reimburses the Nepal Army for using defense-related equipment which between 2018 and 2023 alone paid off 460 million dollars (*BBC Nepal* 2022). On top of such reimbursements, the Nepal Army deducts certain parts of the reimbursement of individual soldiers to fund the Nepal Army Welfare Fund (NAWF). The NAWF was formed in 1975 with an initial capital of NRs 12.49 million as the military's welfare organization to support families of military personnel through health, education, economic relief, and insurance-related schemes. But by 2023, the funds of the NAWF ballooned to Rs 77.61 billion (Nepal News 2022) enabling the Nepal Army to use the increased capital to further its corporate interests (Sotomayor 2013). The Welfare Fund has allowed the Army to invest and operate in critical sectors of the economy, including, venturing into the construction of critical national infrastructures such as Kathmandu-Tarai Expressway, running gas stations, operating medical colleges and mineral water company, overseeing supplies for

emergency medicines, and has been politically lobbying to venture into textile and banking industries (Dahal 2017). Such expanding corporate interests have brought forth key questions about the Nepal Army's work outside its mandate, experience, and capacity and how peacekeeping reimbursements have over the years inadvertently enhanced the Army's economic hold domestically (Rijal 2020).

Supplementing the financial rewards from the UN for Nepal's peacekeeping participation, the Nepal government budget also supports the military by allowing for procurement of arms, services to prepare and make Nepal more competitive for future UN peacekeeping deployments (S. Sharma 2017). In the last decade, the budget for the Nepal Army has grown three-fold (Khabar 2020). Further, in addition to the increased budget allocations, multiple off-budget approvals, with little public scrutiny, have been handed over to the Nepal Army often for buying peacekeeping-related equipment. For instance, in 2011, the Army sought Rs3 billion to buy MI-17 helicopters, but Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai sanctioned Rs 3.5 billion, more than the requested amount. Similarly, in 2016, during Prime Minister, K P Oli's first tenure as Prime Minister, Finance Minister Bishnu Poudel allotted Rs27 billion in non-budgetary resources for the military (Kumar 2018). A damning report by a national think-tank highlighted how such "off-budget allocations are the key strategy of rent-seeking for the army, taking significant sums from government and politicians" (Niti Foundation 2019, 12). Such approvals, often in the name of making the Nepal Army more competitive come at a time when governments have banned the purchase of weapons for the Nepal Police, citing the country's collapsing economy (Karki 2023a).

There have also been instances where SFA has been given to the Nepal Army to strengthen its capabilities for peacekeeping deployments, merging the two external factors discussed in this article. For instance, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command co-sponsors Exercise Shanti Prayas, a multinational peacekeeping exercise hosted rotationally between the two countries to prepare the Nepal Army for challenges encountered in peacekeeping missions (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs 2024).

3.3. Causal mechanism 2: no overt intervention in civilian affairs through coups or interference during transfer of power between governments but enhancing the imbalance in civil-military relations

Necessities of SFA and peacekeeping is also seen to have instilled norms of civilian supremacy, and respect for human rights into the Nepal Army. However, the fact that both the UN and international providers of SFA have only intervened in instances of overt interference such as coups and gross violations of human rights by the military, has meant that while militaries have continued to dominate civilian apparatus, they have only minimally adhered to the red line of not conducting "coups" and paying lip-service to ideas of civilian control (M. Adhikari 2020). Despite multiple instances of flouting civilian authorities and the recent controversies around the commercial ventures of the Nepal Army domestically in the country, the UN has rarely taken up the issue.

For instance, despite the intensity of the war, and the widespread criticism internally of the Nepal Army's human rights violation, the linking of post-9/11 discourse on "war on terror" with that of the Maoist insurgency guided US and India to overlook the Nepal Army's misdemeanours (Cheng, Goodhand, and Meehan 2018). Not to risk

their access and potential influence, the UK, for instance, avoided any systematic sanctions against the Nepal Army as an institution or its top brass (International Crisis Group 2010). Formally, countries like the US formally maintained a policy of excluding from training any members of the security forces implicated in human rights abuses. However, such constraints were either too loose to be implemented or there were no mechanisms to vet individual soldiers and their human rights record (Human Rights Watch 2004). Rather, the overall message to the army is clear – “Open political involvement will not be tolerated, and known human rights abusers may lose access to training opportunities in the U.S. and UK, but there is little pressure on the institution as such to reform” (International Crisis Group 2010). In addition, such military assistance furthered the asymmetry between civilian authorities and the military (A. Adhikari 2017).

This has ensured that the Nepal Army today has adapted the language of “human rights” and ideas of civilian supremacy (Nepal Army, n.d.). As the chief of the Nepal Army himself confirmed “Nepali Army is strongly committed to abiding by civilian controlOur interactions with the militaries of the developed democracies and our participation in peacekeeping missions have also been shaping our outlook towards subordinating the military under civilian control” (P. C. Thapa 2019). In 2006, the Nepal government passed the Army Act, which made international humanitarian training a legal requirement for all those recruited to the Nepal Army, which assured the international community of the Nepal Army’s engagement on human rights (International Humanitarian Law in Action 2007). Similarly, the scrutiny by the UN, as a part of its due diligence on troop contributing countries, has led the Nepal Army to maintain formal sense of civilian supremacy, on issues of explicit political interference and human rights violations (M. Adhikari 2020). In one instance, when the UN-OHCHR produced solid report on violations by the Nepal Army in 2005, the Nepal Army committed to abide by international standards and there was a drop in the number of reported disappearances (Rawski and Sharma 2012).

Despite abstaining from overt interference, the contradicting logics of SFA and UN peacekeeping deployments have however overlooked and even furthered the continued imbalance in civil–military relations, where the Nepal Army has dissented or rarely implemented policies decided by civilian authorities which might be detrimental to the power and interest of the Nepal Army. For instance, the issue of civil–military relations was also core to the peace process between the Maoist and the government which started in 2006. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), central to the peace process, committed to address the exclusive nature of the Nepal Army, by integrating former Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army. It also pledged to “prepare and implement the detailed action plan of the Nepali Army’s democratization” and train the army through democratic and human rights values while developing democratic structure, national and inclusive character (Bell et al. 2017, Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Article 4.7). “Democratization of Army” in the case of peace process signalled democratic control of the Army, transparency in internal system of the institution, accountable and responsible on its own action, notably with regards to respect for human rights and rule of law (I. Adhikari 2011). The Interim Constitution further unpacked the “democratization of the Nepal Army” agenda to mean right sizing of Nepal Army, prepare its democratic structure reflecting the national and inclusive character, and train them on democratic

principles and human rights values (I. Adhikari 2011). The agendas have not only been left unimplemented by barely discussed in Nepali polity.

More recently, with 2 billion investments from the NAWF, the Army brought down the 85-year-old neo-classical structure, stating it would build a new hospital there, but went on to rent it out as a shopping complex instead. Further, in doing so, the Nepal Army did not get the necessary building design approval and flouted the existing rules on building permits. This led organizations like Transparency International Nepal to assert how such unilateral decision-making by the Nepal Army in protecting its commercial ventures was ‘weakening democracy’ in Nepal (Bohara 2018b). The political and economic strength of the Nepal Army is evident by the fact that the Nepal Army is still beyond the jurisdiction of the nation’s anti-corruption body, the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (The Record 2020). The Office of the Auditor General regularly flags issues about projects led by the Nepal Army, but these are never followed up (Bohara 2018a).

3.4. Outcome: fostering “discreet dominance”

Peacekeeping deployment and SFA, cumulatively, have helped mitigate overt dominance of the military, it has fostered a “discreet” or covert dominance of military in at least three ways, as illustrated below with empirical instances. While UN Department of Peacekeeping’s focus on socialization on norms of human rights, as well as Western donors providing SFA’s conditioning it to human rights compliance has coerced Nepal Army to not engage overtly in political issues, such external support has strengthened the military to the extent that it continues to dominant, albeit discreetly and covertly, in at least three ways.

First, SFA’s support in weapon procurement and trainings, and monetary compensation for peacekeeping deployments has made militaries financially and institutionally independent, and less dependent on civilian authorities for internal modes of financing. Rather than having to negotiate with civilian counterparts on aspects of military partnerships, training, and equipment, external suppliers of SFA has handed it on a plate, providing the Nepal Army with a form of political patronage by selling arms at concessional rates, offering training, and being the largest contributor of international assistance (S. Ghimire 2018). With continued reimbursement for peacekeeping deployments “adding billions of rupees to its coffers” every year (B. Ghimire 2020), the NAWF has evolved as one of the largest sources of capital in the country, enabling the Army to entrench itself *economically* and *politically* (B. Ghimire 2020). Economically, as discussed above, it has allowed the Nepal Army to be a key corporate player and monopolize key industries. To do the same, the Army has explicitly lobbied for an amendment to the Nepal Army Act which currently prohibits it from investing money from its welfare fund in business activities as a “promoter” (B. Ghimire 2020). Such an amendment will allow the Nepal Army to bypass its usual method of generating profit through interest from bank deposits by directly investing in high-value projects, turning the Army into a “for-profit” organization (The Record 2020). Such an amendment comes at a time when the Nepal Army’s increased foray into corporate and business activities has drawn it into many corruption scandals (B. Sharma 2020). The Nepali case stands in contrast to the Indian example where the

state invests and oversees equipment procurement for peacemaking operations, as well as runs a welfare policy for the Army and the government is in turn answerable to all questions that follow and not the Army. Politically, it has successfully translated its economic power into political power, by co-opting the political class through bribes, and financial incentives to support policies that are key to its interests. According to a retired defence secretary, the Nepal Army is known to reward political leaders and bureaucrats – whether in the form of houses, or other financial incentives – who endorse budgetary and other proposals made by the Army while punishing those who oppose it, usually in the form of transfers of bureaucrats (*The Record* 2020). Thus, Nepal's political class have failed to monitor the Nepal Army, and even covered up their wrongdoings and financial irregularities (*The Record* 2020). Rather, a collusion between the Nepal Army and political parties is evident, where both cooperate on corrupt, illegal behaviour, including, exaggerating the actual costs involved for defence-related procurement and pocketing excess funds, a trend bolstered by the fact that the Nepal Army is beyond the jurisdiction of the anti-corruption body, Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (Kumar 2018; Niti Foundation 2019).

Second, both SFA and UN peacekeeping deployments are avenues where the Nepal Army has acquired sectoral autonomy. Peacekeeping has become a part of military's exclusive area of influence or a reserve domain, without little civilian intervention (Sotomayor 2014a). What should have been driven by Nepal's foreign policy and Defence establishment has become the sole prerogative of the Nepal Army. The Nepal Army has often been agitated when political leaders, civil society representatives or experts have sought to discuss issues regarding its role, responsibility and size. In the budget discussion in the parliament in 2023/24, when two MPs raised the question of the need to “downsize” the Army, the Nepal Army not only institutionally criticized such public debate, but the chief of the Nepal Army responded by arguing that the size of the Nepal Army was to be decided by the government, not “self-proclaimed academics and self-proclaimed experts” (Karki 2023b). Such absence of civilian engagement on military issues, especially on issues of peacekeeping deployments and defense assistance, has enabled various public and political authorities to voluntarily cede their autonomy to make decisions on military affairs to the Nepal Army (Sotomayor 2014a). SFA in Nepal for the military shares a similar story of being an avenue of military autonomy and sole prerogative. In 2022, it was exposed by Nepal's media that the Nepal Army, in 2015 and 2017, had applied to be a part of the U.S. State Partnership Program (SPP), an exchange program between the US National Guard and Nepal by sending a letter to the US ambassador, without consulting the political leadership. As things came to the fore, years later, there were questions about how civilian institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and political leadership had been bypassed (Giri 2022).

Third, relationships built through SFA, and peacekeeping deployments leads external partners like the UN to legitimize and strengthen military as an institution, often at the expense of civilians. For instance, the continued opportunity given to the Nepal Army for peacekeeping deployments despite allegations of disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, intimidation and “extrajudicial custody,” signal the unwillingness by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to hold the NA to account. This was despite the fact that UN officials knew the importance that the Nepal Army attached to

peacekeeping assignments (von Einsiede and Salih 2017). The UN, notably, failed to use its leverage over the Army, which has long been a major peacekeeping troop contributor, to push for Maoist integration. Rather, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations was even reluctant to properly vet and bar Nepal Army individuals and units accused of having committed serious abuses in the conflict from participating in peacekeeping missions (Advocacy Forum-Nepal 2014). The relationships and dependencies built through SFA also provides military institutions like the Nepal Army with international protection and support. A notable instance on the role of SFA, and the in bestowing political legitimacy in Nepal is the Indian government support in 2008. Issues such as the open border, and the fraternal bonds between the Indian Army and the NA, combined with growing traditional, and non-traditional, security threats across the border, led India to invest in Nepal's security sector in general, and the NA in particular. Indian security concerns intensified after 2006, with India seeing the NA as the only state institution to remain intact, with all other institutions dismantled or delegitimized (Jha 2014). Further, with the rise of Maoist power, especially with their electoral win in 2008, India also saw the NA as the only force that could curb Maoist expansionism (A. Adhikari 2012). Nepal witnessed a political crisis in 2008, when Maoists-led government sought to sack the Army Chief, on the grounds that the Army had extended the tenure of eight brigadier generals, not sanctioned by the Maoist government (Bidwai 2009). India, on this occasion, lent its total support to the Nepal Army, seeing the Maoist as a threat to the state, and the Nepal Army as the only institution in Nepal that could provide international but also cross-border stability (Bidwai 2009). India lobbied with different non-Maoist political parties, engineering a 20-party coalition leading to the collapse of the Maoist government. India also succeeded in persuading the President to revoke the government order for the Nepal Army Chief Kautwal's dismissal, thereby ensuring he remained in post (A. Adhikari 2014; Jha 2014). This episode is noted by analysts to have left deep legacy, with political parties acquiescing that to stay in power, the Army must be appeased (Gautam 2018). In fact, India also protested against the integration of former Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army, a core aspect of the UN's work in Nepal. This was underpinned by the view of the NA, as the ultimate bulwark to its security, had caused it to believe that no action should be taken, which could undermine that institution's cohesion and morale (A. Adhikari 2012).

In discussing the centrality of external factors such as SFA and peacekeeping deployments in shaping civil–military relations in Nepal in the form of “discreet dominance,” other variables also need accounting for. The broader scholarship has discussed on how wars, political instability and civil resistance movements impact civil–military relations, all of which are applicable to Nepal (Beliakova 2021; Koehler and Albrecht 2021; Piplani and Talmadge 2016). Nepali commentators and experts also highlight how political instability and absence of consensus on the role of the Army persist as the primary challenge for the state of civil–military relations in the country (Gautam 2018). The article does not seek to displace these variables but underlines how SFA and UN peacekeeping deployments accentuate these internal variables. For instance, if civil wars have propensity of skewing the civil–military balance to the military's favor, the large volume of SFA during the war enhanced this trend. Similarly, the fact that “discreet dominance” has persisted despite differences in levels of political instability also signals that external variables continue to be important (Sotomayor 2014a)

4. Conclusion

This article highlights the paradox of external support to the military through peacekeeping deployment opportunities and SFA. While external support, in different guises, has often been cited to promote socialization to liberal norms, such as civilian-supremacy and human rights among others. The case of Nepal empirically demonstrates that while SFA and the UN's standards for peacekeeping deployments do prevent overt forms of dominance in civil–military relations and human rights violations, it does not prevent covert forms of military dominance. Rather, such forms of external support might inadvertently promote discreet and covert forms of dominance of the military. In doing so, the article adds to the growing body of work that examines different ways in which militaries dominate or surpass civilian authorities, beyond over and coercive forms such as coups. The article also highlights how external variables, such as SFA and troop deployment for UN missions, tend to be significant in shaping civil–military relations, especially in developing countries. Such external factors are likely to be even more pertinent to conflict-affected or politically instable contexts like Nepal, where the legitimacy of civilian authorities is low, there are inherent benefits of the military who can mobilize and leverage external support to their benefit.

With examples of SFA from non-Western states, this article underscores how the rise of non-Western donors, like India and China is also impacting trends in SFA, notably around the absence of basic scrutiny over human rights violations, norms of civilian control. This also points to the need for the scholarship on SFA to decenter away from its focus on Western donors and examine the increased significance of non-Western rising states, and its implication for liberal norms such as human rights. The article also places onus on the unintended consequences of UN peacekeeping, as a key external variable in pushing for discreet dominance of the military. It underscores that the UN, while has increasingly been vigilant in monitoring peacekeepers in host states, owing to the recent spate of incidents on sexual abuse among others, it has yet to sufficiently look at its unintended consequences in troop contributing countries. Highlighting the paradox enabled by peacekeeping deployments and SFA – which have been successful in pushing the anti-coup norm but have invertedly promoted discreet forms of dominance – the article calls for a greater scholarly attention on unintended consequences of such external factors on civil–military relations.

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