

India-Taiwan Relations: Time is Ripe to Bolster Ties

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2020 will be remembered for a number of reasons. COVID-19 has changed the world in unimaginable ways. However, one silver lining of the pandemic is that it expanded Taiwan's global space. One of the greatest developments of 2020 was a deeper understanding about Taiwan worldwide, especially in India. Due to Taiwan's impeccable COVID-19 response and also India-China violent clashes in the Galwan valley, domestic public opinion in India is increasingly shifting in favour of Taiwan. However, despite this positive momentum, the Indian leadership still remains cautious about elevating political ties with Taiwan.

There have been calls to re-evaluate India's China policy and advance ties with Taiwan. India does not have formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, and the relations are managed primarily through unofficial channels. The China factor has loomed large over the prospects of setting the right context for India-Taiwan relations. While the recent standoff has provided a window of opportunity for India to look towards Taiwan, there is need for India to devise a long-term strategy to engage Taiwan. Taiwan too, under the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen, has emphasised the importance of strengthening ties with India. A persistent policy and a long-term framework to guide the relationship is the need of the hour.

India-Taiwan relations remain one of the most understudied and under-appreciated relationships of the twenty-first century. While fellow democracies, such as the USA and Japan have stepped up cooperation with Taiwan in the

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past few years, India has not yet been able to fully realise the potential of its relations with Taiwan - so much so that India's approach towards Taiwan is sometimes characterised as a series of missed opportunities. However, 2020 has provided another window of opportunity to countries, especially India, to rethink their Taiwan policy and expand cooperation with Taiwan.

Taiwan's impeccable COVID-19 response has generated greater awareness about, and garnered appreciation for Taiwan among Indians. This, coupled with growing tensions with China, has paved the path for greater appreciation of Taiwan, and generated discussion about Taiwan as a prospective partner in the Indo-Pacific region. In the aftermath of the Galwan clashes, India's focus has shifted to managing tensions with China rather than attempting to cooperate and expand the scope of relations with it. For decades, even though the boundary dispute has been the biggest irritant in India-China relations, the resolution has been delayed by the Chinese side. However, these recent clashes have made it apparent that the boundary dispute is not about differing perceptions, and that China has not been respectful of the status quo. It has not only violated several agreements signed between the two countries over the years, but has also shown complete disregard for India's territorial sensitivities. The prospects for cordial India-China relations also seem bleak in the times to come. These clashes have had a decisive impact on the political and economic discourse in India, and are increasingly changing the domestic perception about China in India.

Earlier, any discussion about India's engagement with Taiwan was put in the context of India-China relations and India's adherence to the so-called One-China policy. The focus has always been on managing India's relations with China. India's attempts to maintain cordial ties with China has outweighed the perils of engaging Taiwan. Relations with Taiwan have suffered for a long time due to Indian leadership's hesitation to make any reference to Taiwan that could obstruct the prospects of strengthened relations between India and China. Given China's growing aggression towards India, this approach has not proven beneficial for India's interests, and overlooking Taiwan in the hope of having lasting peace in the relationship with China is proving counterproductive. It is in this context that this essay attempts to highlight the importance of engaging Taiwan for India, and the prospects for India-Taiwan relations.

Overview of India-Taiwan Relations

India and Taiwan have long-standing ties. The bonhomie was witnessed during

Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Mainland China in 1939, and later, the visit of Kuomintang (KMT) Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Soong Mei-ling to New Delhi and Kolkata in 1942. The visit by Chiang and his wife was instrumental in forging a closer bond between India and the Republic of China (ROC). While Chiang Kai-shek gave an interview to All India Radio in Chinese, in an attempt to reach out to a wider audience in India, Soong Mei-ling gave an interview in English. However, the dynamics began to change when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over Mainland China, and India had to share a border with the communist China, which later on became disputed.

On the eve of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong declared PRC's foreign policy guidelines, and asked countries to shift recognition from the ROC to the PRC. He stated,

In order to make a clean break with the foreign policy of the old and semi-colonial China and uphold the independence and sovereignty of New China, we should "start anew" and "put the house in order before inviting guests". That is to say, China renounced all the diplomatic relations the Kuomintang Government had established with foreign countries, treated heads of foreign diplomatic missions accredited to Old China as ordinary foreign nationals instead of diplomatic envoys; reviewed all the treaties and agreements Old China had concluded with foreign countries; gradually cleared up the prerogatives and influence the imperialist countries had in China; and established new diplomatic relations with other countries on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and equality and mutual benefit.¹

India became the second non-communist country to recognise the PRC, and establish diplomatic ties on 1 April 1950. When India shifted its recognition from the ROC to the PRC, the KMT leadership heavily criticised India's decision.

As for the neutralists, of whom Nehru is indisputably the most outstanding representative, they have always been labouring under the illusion that their national security can be ensured by humouring the Chinese Communists as far as possible. Hence, Nehru's fence-sitting attitude and the policy of appeasement pursued by Indian diplomats in the United Nations and at other international conferences ... when Nehru has outlived his usefulness as a tool of the Communists, it will be the armed might of the anti-Communist democratic nations instead of Indian neutralism which will save India from Communist invasion and enslavement.²

Along with Myanmar (then Burma), India and PRC signed the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. India's willingness to establish cordial ties with China led to a halt in India-Taiwan relations. For much of the Cold War period, there was barely any contact between India and Taiwan. Even though the relations between India and China were suspended for 15 years after the 1962, India and Taiwan did not make many advances towards each other. It was only in the 1990s that channels for unofficial contacts were established.

In 1992, Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao launched India's 'Look East Policy', while Taiwan's President Lee Teng Hui launched his 'Go South Policy'. The focus of their respective policies was on engaging the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economies. However, the decade of the 1990s also began to see unofficial relations taking shape. The representative offices - the Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre (TECC) and the India-Taipei Association (ITA) - were established in 1995. In 2011, the TECC set up an office in Chennai. In the past few years, the Taiwan External Trade Development Council has established four offices in India: in Chennai, New Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata, and held the first-ever Taiwan Expo in India in May 2018.

Table 1: List of Selected Agreements Signed between India and Taiwan

Area	Name of the Agreement	Signed in
Economics	Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement and Customs Mutual Assistance Agreement	July 2011
	ATA Carnet Protocol	March 2013
	MoU on Small and Medium Sized Enterprises	December 2015
	MoU between Taiwan Chamber of and India's PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry	June 2016
	MOU on Promotion of Industry Collaboration	December 14, 2017
	Authorised Economic Operators Recognition Action	2017
	Mutual Recognition of the Respective Authorised Economic Operation Programs	2018
	Bilateral Investment Agreement	December 18, 2018
Science and Technology	MOU on Scientific and Technological Cooperation	2007
	MOU of Cooperation between ROC (Taiwan) Academia Sinica and Indian National Science Academy	2012

Education	MoU between Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education of Taiwan and Association of Indian Universities,	2010
	MoU on Social Sciences Research	2019
Aviation	Air Services Agreement	September 2016
Agriculture	MoU on Taiwan-India Agricultural Cooperation	September 2016
Railways	Letter of Intent for Cooperation on Railway Heritage in Chiayi City of Taiwan	December 24, 2016

Source: Taiwan Economic and Cultural Centre in India, Republic of China (Taiwan)

India's interests in Taiwan mainly lie in the economic sector. From US\$ 1.19 billion in 2001–02 to US\$ 5.7 billion in 2019-20, the two-way trade has increased manifold since the onset of the twenty-first century. India primarily exports Naphtha, metal and metal products, organic chemicals, and agricultural products to Taiwan; and its imports from Taiwan include PVC, machinery, organic chemicals, electrical machinery, ICT products, and solar cells.³ As far as investment is concerned, by 2018, with a cumulative investment of US\$ 1.5 billion, more than 100 Taiwanese companies were operational in India.⁴

Table 2: India-Taiwan Two Way Trade

(US\$ Billions)

Year	Export	Import	Total Trade	Balance of Trade
2015-16	1.4	3.3	4.7	(-) 1.9
2016-17	2.2	3.1	5.3	(-) 0.9
2017-18	2.1	3.9	6	(-) 1.8
2018-19	2.6	4.6	7.2	(-) 2
2019-20	1.7	4	5.7	(-) 2.3

Source: Ministry of Commerce, Republic of India

Taiwan is a major hub in the regional supply mechanism. According to the ITA, “the potential sectors of collaboration between India and Taiwan are Electronic Systems Design and Manufacturing (ESDM), Machinery, Auto parts, Green energy, Agri-businesses, Food processing, Biotechnology, Pharmaceutical, Tourism and Education.”⁵ In terms of technology, India can benefit immensely from the technological advances Taiwan has made. For example, the IT sector, cell phone technology, etc. are the areas in which India generally relies on China. But it can easily switch over to Taiwan.⁶ Since India is attempting to decouple from the Chinese economy, Taiwan can be an important economic partner. In October 2020, the Indian government decided

to give approval to Taiwanese firms, such as the Foxconn Technology Group, the Wistron Corp. and the Pegatron Corp., for investment worth more than US\$ 143 billion for Smartphone production, over the next five years.⁷ This also makes sense as Taiwan is one of the few economies that has continued to grow amidst the pandemic. According to Taiwan's Statistics Bureau, "Taiwan's gross domestic product expanded 3.3 percent in the third quarter from a year ago, its fastest increase since June 2018."⁸

When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014, there were speculations that India's Taiwan policy will see a transformation. He visited Taiwan in his capacity as the General Secretary of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1999; and later, in 2011, he invited a business delegation to Gujarat when he was the Chief Minister of the state. In 2014, he invited Ambassador Chung Kwang-Tien, former Representative of Taiwan to India, to his swearing-in ceremony. Over the years, there have been several parliamentary delegation visits from Taiwan to India. The last visit was by an all-women parliamentary delegation in 2017, under the framework of the India-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Forum. China registered a strong protest to the growing interaction between India and Taiwan, and immediately after that, the Doklam standoff took place. Though it seems there was no link between the parliamentary delegation's visit and the border standoff, it did shift the Indian leadership's attention towards the boundary dispute, and affected the consistency in interactions between India and Taiwan. Immediately after the Doklam standoff, India, along with Australia, Japan, and the USA decided to revive the quadrilateral security dialogue. China's growing aggression was at the helm of rejuvenated interest of the four countries in the quadrilateral security dialogue. However, sensing the countries' efforts to form the coalition against China, the Chinese leadership extended an olive branch to India, and suggested that the Indian and Chinese leaders meet in an informal summit. That led to the Wuhan Summit in 2018, and later to the Mamallapuram summit in 2019. These developments led the Indian leadership to believe that they might achieve a breakthrough in more than seven-decade old boundary dispute. This meant putting elevating ties with Taiwan on the back burner. In 2018, Air India, the Indian official airline, changed the name of Taiwan to Chinese Taipei on its website. This was widely perceived as a move to rectify ties with China by agreeing to the nomenclature set by China. The last few years have witnessed growing competition, conflict, and divergence between India and China, and India's obvious preoccupation with China has obstructed India-Taiwan ties. The cooperation between India and Taiwan is restricted to the commercial sector

and the science and technology field. The scope of cooperation in other sectors, such as education, security, and even people-to-people contact, remains limited.

India and the New Southbound Policy

In 2016, Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan assumed office, and one of her first policy moves was to launch the New Southbound Policy. The major objectives of the policy include,

- ‘Fostering links between Taiwan and the New Southbound countries in the areas of economic and trade relations, science and technology, and culture; share resources, talent, and markets;
- Creating a new cooperation mode that seeks mutual benefits and win-win situations;
- Forging a sense of economic community.’⁹

The New Southbound Policy has four components: soft power links; supply chain links; regional markets links; and people-to-people links. On 20 May 2016, during her inaugural address, President Tsai Ing-wen stated,

We will promote the New Southbound Policy in order to elevate the scope and diversity of our external economy, and to bid farewell to our past overreliance on a single market ... We will broaden exchanges and cooperation with regional neighbours in areas such as technology, culture and commerce, and expand in particular our dynamic relationships with ASEAN and India.¹⁰

That was partly in response to China’s attempts to poach Taiwan’s diplomatic allies. However, the New Southbound Policy is just not about reducing Taiwan’s dependence on China; it is also about increasing its international outreach. On 5 September 2016, Executive Yuan unveiled a plan to promote the policy, and illustrated four major components of the policy: ‘promoting economic collaboration, conducting talent exchanges, sharing resources, and forging regional links’.¹¹

While the New Southbound Policy was considered an extension of the previous administration’s Go South policy, the New Southbound Policy is wider in geographical and administrative scope. In total, 18 countries are part of the New Southbound policy: 10 ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand, and six South Asian countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. India is one of the focus countries of the New Southbound

Policy. The Go South Policy was launched by Lee Teng-hui, the former President of Taiwan in 1994, and was carried forward by Chen Shui-bian. The focus areas of the earlier Go South Policies was on lessening dependence on China, and reaching out to the Southeast Asian economies. Similarly, India launched its Look East Policy in 1992, and the focus was on the ASEAN.

As Taiwan is attempting to find new partners and diversify its foreign relations, India occupies an important place in the New Southbound policy as well as Taiwan's foreign policy agenda in a wider sense. James Huang, the first Director of the New Southbound Policy office and now the Chair of the Taiwan External Trade Development Council, called "India the 'jewel' in Taiwan's external economic strategy."¹² India has also upgraded its Look East Policy, and the newer Act East Policy covers a wider geographical expanse, including countries of East Asia to the Pacific Island. Taiwan is also a part of the policy geographically. India's expansion of its Look East Policy and Taiwan's willingness to strengthen ties in the Indo-Pacific under the aegis of its New Southbound Policy, are complementary with each other.

Time to Revisit the One-China Policy

India was one of the first countries to adhere to the One-China policy. That means India does not have diplomatic ties with Taiwan. However, India has stopped mentioning its adherence to the One-China policy in the joint statements with China and other official documents since 2010. What is interesting to note is that even though India mentioned its acceptance of the One-China policy before 2010, it never mentioned Taiwan in the joint statements, while Tibet was mentioned several times. For instance, in 2005, during the visit of Wen Jiabao, former Chinese Premier, the joint statement made a specific mention of Tibet,

The Indian side reiterated that it recognized the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of the territory of the People's Republic of China and that it did not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India. The Indian side recalled that India was among the first countries to recognize that there is one China and its one China Policy remains unaltered. The Indian side stated it would continue to abide by its One China policy.¹³

In 2008, during the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to China, the mention of Tibet was dropped; but India's acknowledgment of the

One-China policy was there. The joint statement mentions the following.

The Indian side recalls that India was among the first countries to recognize that there is One China and that its One China policy has remained unaltered. The Indian side states that it would continue to abide by its One China policy, and oppose any activity that is against the One China principle. The Chinese side expresses its appreciation for the Indian position.¹⁴

In 2014, during the visit of Wang Yi, China's Foreign Minister, to India, the late Sushma Swaraj, former Minister of External Affairs, stated, "We support the One China policy. However, we expect you to also have a One India policy."¹⁵ Despite the protracted boundary dispute, China's attempts to undermine India's territorial integrity and growing tensions with China, India has remained overcautious in engaging Taiwan. It has yet to shed its diffidence. The China factor has loomed large over any prospect for the elevation of India's ties with Taiwan.

Taiwan officials have been urging India to forge closer ties with Taiwan without compromising on its adherence to One-China policy. In this context, Tien Chung-kwang, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Taiwan, and the former Representative of Taiwan to India, said,

Taipei is hoping and urging the Indian government to develop relations between India and Taiwan to be parallel to ties with China. We have no objections for India to make friends with any country in the world but not at the cost of Taiwan's relations with India. This is something (on which) we are very firm and urging the Indian government.¹⁶

What is important for India to realise is that the relations with Taiwan can be managed and upgraded without abandoning adherence to the One-China policy. Cooperation in areas such as economics, culture, agriculture, education, etc. may be expanded without considering and worrying excessively about China's reaction.

India-Taiwan Relations in 2020

In 2020, unprecedentedly, domestic public opinion in India shifted in Taiwan's favour. This is primarily due to Taiwan's COVID-19 response. As of 17 December 2020, with 749 cases [657 imported; 55 local; 36 from the Panshi fast combat ship; 1 unknown], and seven casualties, Taiwan's democratic and far successful model to deal with the COVID-19 has been presented as an alternative to China's rather authoritarian model. Taiwan has actually

turned the crisis into an opportunity, and shown that its policy in the time of the pandemic is inclusive. It has donated millions of masks (more than 50 million to at least 80 countries), Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and other necessary medical supplies to the countries in need. It has also extended its medical diplomacy to India. In May 2020, Taiwan donated 1 million masks to the Indian Red Cross Society, and masks worth Rs. 45 lakhs (US\$ 61,000) to the Mizoram government in June 2020. Later, due to the growing tensions between India and China, and the latter's rising aggression at the border front, China is increasingly seen as an adversary in India. Taiwan's image as a responsible stakeholder has been established among Indians, and calls to proactively engage Taiwan are getting stronger. On 20 May 2020, Meenakshi Lekhi and Rahul Kaswan, two BJP Parliamentarians, attended the second swearing-in ceremony of Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen virtually.

One of the limitations in India-Taiwan relations is that the government-to-government interactions are still restricted, and the potential in several areas of cooperation remain under utilised. In the absence of official diplomatic ties, non-state actors have played a crucial role in bolstering ties. For example, media's role in generating awareness about Taiwan in the COVID-19 times is a case in point. Wide media reportage about Taiwan's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic played a pivotal role in steering the discussion in Taiwan's favour. On 7 October 2020, the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi issued a diktat to the Indian media not to refer Taiwan as a country while reporting on its National Day. The statement read,

Regarding the so-called forthcoming National Day of Taiwan, the Chinese Embassy in India would like to remind our media friends that there is only One China in the world, and the Government of People's Republic of China is the sole legitimate government representing the whole of China. Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory.¹⁷

This backfired, resulting in even wider reporting on Taiwan. Several Indians, including journalists and local leaders from the BJP, wished Taiwan on its National Day, and even posters were put outside the Chinese embassy to wish Taiwan on 10 October. This led to meaningful discussions about Taiwan in India. Even India's Ministry of External Affairs responded by saying the "Indian media is a free entity and they can report on any issue they deem fit."¹⁸ Taiwan seems eager to expand ties with India. The India-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Forum was revived in 2020. Several developments have led to positive momentum in India-Taiwan relations in 2020. However,

what remains to be seen how the two sides sustain the momentum.

Prospects for India-Taiwan Relations

Engaging Taiwan has its own merits. Elevating ties in the field of commerce, culture, education, science and technology does not violate India's adherence to One China Policy. Steps need to be taken to bolster already existing mechanisms. An agreement between the Taiwan Chamber of Commerce and India's PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry already exist. Under the framework of the agreement, annual industry dialogue may be initiated. Commerce dialogue exists at the secretary level. The level of the same may be elevated for better prospects in the economic field. Another important addition to the already existing dialogues will be an annual India-Taiwan CEO Forum, or at least regular exchanges between senior business executives.¹⁹

Baushuan Ger, Taiwan's Representative to India, has pointed out complementarity between India and Taiwan for fostering industry collaboration. He has highlighted that,

Taiwan excels at hardware manufacturing while India's expertise and competence lies in software development. India enjoys a demographic dividend as well as a perfect location with respect to market access in East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Responding to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have noticed that India has doubled down on its 'Make in India' initiative and Self-Reliant India (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*) to boost the economy and attract foreign investment. India, therefore, is invigorated to put more effort to attract Taiwanese businesses. Taiwan's industries, especially ICT and electronics, have become technologically autonomous. We are glad to see India continue to improve its investment environment, as this benefits Taiwanese businesses looking to expand investment in India.²⁰

As far as cooperation at the government level is concerned, a dialogue in policy planning, and cyber security will prove mutually beneficial. Health cooperation should also be expanded. Other countries such as the USA are attempting to learn from Taiwan's best practices. In August 2020, Alex Azar, US Secretary of Health and Human Services visited Taiwan. It was the first visit by a US cabinet level official since 1979. During Azar's visit, a memorandum of understanding on health cooperation between the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the US Department of Health and Human Services

was signed. Similarly, India, which is yet to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, could learn from Taiwan's approach towards the COVID-19 regarding what approach suits it best.

However, one area that has immense potential but remains under-utilised till date is people-to-people linkages. Given that Taiwan's New Southbound Policy is people-centric, in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition, this aspect assumes immense importance in India-Taiwan relations. A lot could be done to strengthen tourism prospects. In 2019, the number of outbound Indian tourists was 29 million. Countries such as Thailand and Singapore receive a substantial number of Indian tourists. For instance, in 2018, Singapore received 1.4 million Indian tourists, whereas 2 million Indian tourists visited Thailand. However, the number of Indian tourists visiting Taiwan remains low. Only 35000–45000 Indian tourists visit Taiwan annually. Similarly, only 30000–35000 Taiwanese tourists visit India annually. Though Taiwan Tourism Bureau has an office in Mumbai, the fundamental problem still remains the lack of awareness about Taiwan's potential as a major tourist destination. Taiwan is trying to work on this. One example is that it has launched halal and vegetarian tourism to attract tourists from South and Southeast Asia. Taiwan tourism bureau came up with *Taiwan 2020* which aimed at increasing tourism to Taiwan from Asian countries.

Taiwan should also consider introducing easy tourist visas to Indians, in a way somewhat similar to Thailand and Malaysia. With more awareness about Taiwan and its successful COVID-19 response, most Indians are more likely to choose Taiwan as their next holiday destination once the pandemic has eased.²¹ Difficult visa procedure for Indians for Taiwan remains an issue, and is limiting the prospects for tourism. The two sides also need to work on direct connectivity between Delhi and Taipei. Only China Airlines (Taiwan's state-owned airlines), operates direct flights between Delhi and Taipei. More airlines should be encouraged to start direct flights not just between Delhi and Taipei but between other Indian states and Taipei. More options and cheaper air travel will motivate people from both sides to travel. More needs to be done in the field of tourism and culture. India's soft power - one of the strongest features of India's public diplomacy - is not projected well in Taiwan.

Both, India and Taiwan do not have enough scholarship to understand each other. More Taiwanese and Indian scholars should be encouraged to study India and Taiwan. For better understanding of each other, further academic exchanges at the level of think-tanks and universities are the need

of the hour. Educational exchanges are yet to achieve their optimum level. Taiwan may be developed as an important destination for Indians to learn the Chinese language. Taiwan has been able to attract Indian students and professionals primarily in the sciences and information technology fields. While Taiwan's Ministry of Education offers language and higher studies scholarships, the lack of awareness about such programs is still a key challenge.

The Way Forward

There is a growing realisation that China should not define India's equation with Taiwan, and a rethink in the policy is crucial. Countries such as Japan and Singapore have established robust ties with Taiwan. India may emulate their model.

Today, the interests of India and Taiwan converge more than ever before. 2020 was a year of possibilities for India and Taiwan. However, to sustain the momentum in ties, it is imperative for both countries to make the relations multidimensional and strengthen ties at several levels, such as people-to-people contact, business-to-business connections, and government-to-government ties. The New Southbound Policy and the Act East Policy provide a framework for India and Taiwan to engage each other, and a consistent and long-term strategy for engagement will be mutually beneficial.

Notes :

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