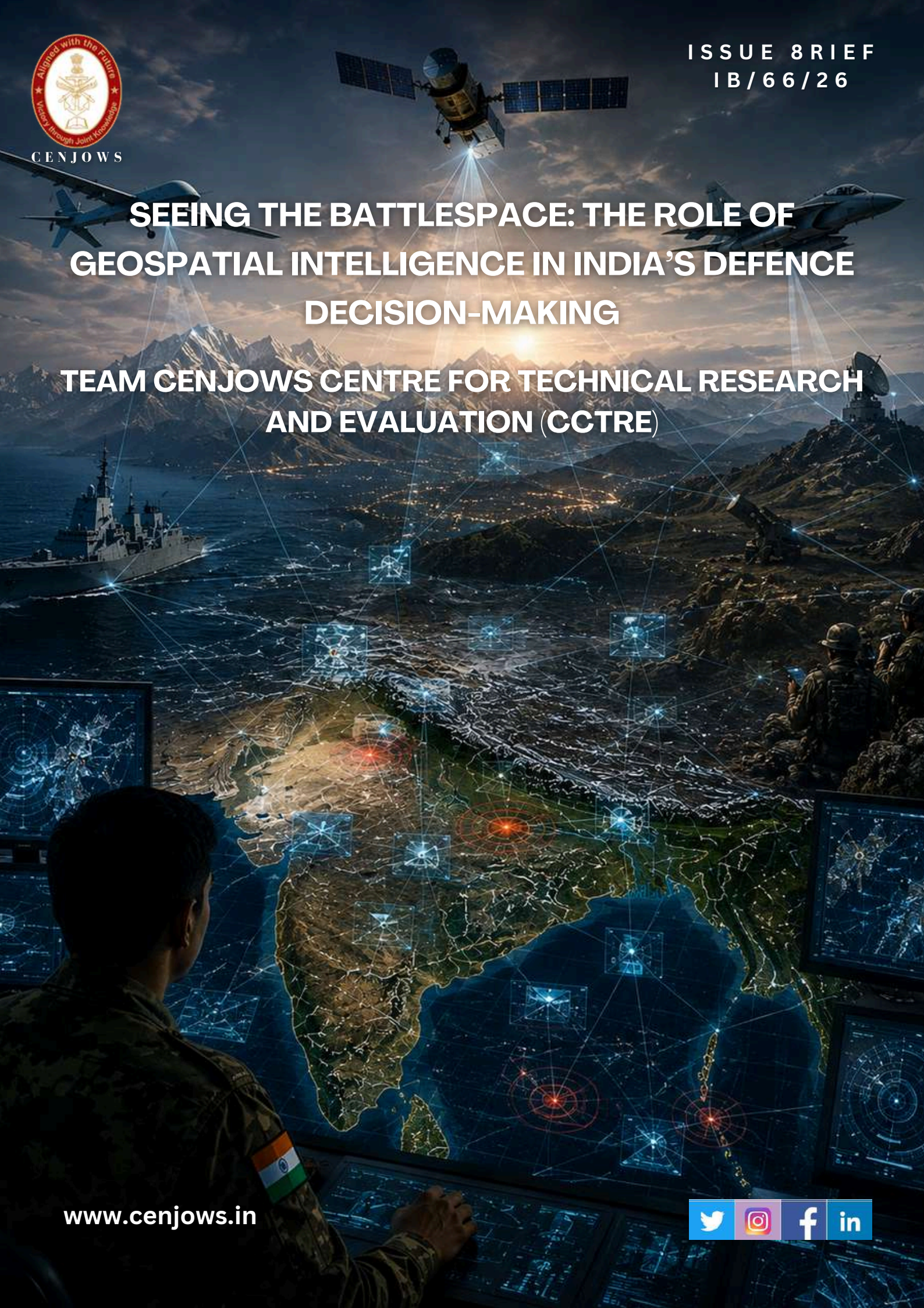

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SEEING THE BATTLESPACE: THE ROLE OF GEOSPATIAL INTELLIGENCE IN INDIA'S DEFENCE DECISION-MAKING

TEAM CENJOWS CENTRE FOR TECHNICAL RESEARCH AND EVALUATION (CCTRE)

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Seeing the Battlespace: The Role of Geospatial Intelligence in India's Defence Decision-Making

Team CENJOWS Centre for Technical Research and Evaluation (CCTRE)

Abstract

Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) has evolved from a supplementary cartographic discipline into the foundational bedrock of modern military operations, providing commanders with a decisive informational advantage. This whitepaper exhaustively analyses the role of GEOINT in India's defence decision-making architecture, particularly within the context of an increasingly volatile Indo-Pacific region and a highly contested continental periphery. Driven by the strategic imperatives outlined in the Defence Forces Vision 2047, the Indian military is undergoing a paradigm shift from legacy, platform-centric strategies to intelligence-centric warfare. This transition is highlighted by the planned establishment of the Defence Geospatial Agency (DGA), the integration of multi-domain operations through Integrated Theatre Commands, and the execution of the Space-Based Surveillance Phase-III (SBS-III) project. Through an integrated analysis of satellite constellations, navigational autonomy via the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (NavIC), and the fusion of AI-enabled multi-sensor data, this report examines how

India is striving for absolute technological sovereignty. It further explores the geopolitical ramifications of intelligence-sharing pacts, such as the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) with the United States, juxtaposed against the critical vulnerabilities of commercial "shutter control." Ultimately, the analysis posits that the adoption of a "zero-trust" geospatial architecture and the seamless integration of artificial intelligence for rapid target annotation and spoof-detection are not merely optional upgrades, but existential necessities for India to secure its expanding regional and global interests.

Introduction: The Evolution of the Geospatial Battlespace

The character of modern warfare is undergoing a profound and irreversible metamorphosis. The traditional, siloed domains of land, sea, and air have been inextricably linked with space, cyberspace, and the cognitive dimensions, creating a continuous, hyper-connected battlespace. In this environment, the ability to "see" the battlefield to accurately monitor, assess, and predict adversary movements across vast geographic expanses is the ultimate determinant of tactical and strategic success. Geospatial Intelligence serves as the critical enabler of this vision. Defined legally and operationally as the exploitation and analysis of imagery, geospatial information, and associated data, GEOINT synthesizes information ranging from the ultraviolet to microwave portions of the electromagnetic spectrum.[1] It integrates electro-optical imagery, infrared signatures, synthetic aperture radar (SAR) data, and georeferenced signals intelligence into a coherent space-time context.[2]

Globally, the space environment has transformed GEOINT into a data-rich, highly contested discipline. As of 2023, there were more than 7,560 operational satellites in orbit, with the United States, China, and Russia dominating the landscape.[3] Projections indicate that the total number of satellites in orbit will exceed 12,900 by the mid-2020s, mirroring a geospatial solutions market forecast to surpass USD 2.1 trillion by 2034.[4] This democratization and commercialization of intelligence mean that dual-use infrastructures, troop deployments, and maritime movements are subject to continuous surveillance, drastically reducing the space for strategic deception.[5]

For the Indian Armed Forces, the strategic integration of GEOINT has transitioned from

a localized tactical requirement to a national security imperative of the highest order. Situated between two nuclear-armed adversaries with whom it shares active, contested borders, and overseeing a vast maritime domain critical to global trade, India's security architecture demands persistent, high-fidelity situational awareness. Historically, the Indian military relied on state-owned civilian space agencies or foreign commercial entities for satellite imagery[6]. However, the modern geostrategic calculus acknowledges that true strategic autonomy cannot exist if a nation relies on external powers for its eyes and ears. Consequently, the integration of indigenous space-based assets, geographic information systems (GIS), and artificial intelligence into the military decision-making loop is transforming how India plans, executes, and sustains its defence operations across all echelons.[7]

Strategic Imperatives: Vision 2047 and Theatre Command Integration

The Indian military's long-term modernization and structural overhaul are encapsulated in the *"Defence Forces Vision 2047: A Roadmap for a Future-Ready Indian Military"*, released by the Integrated Defence Staff.[8] The vision articulates a comprehensive meta-strategy designed to transform the armed forces into a technologically advanced, fully integrated, and multi-domain force capable of projecting power across the Indo-Pacific by the centenary of Indian independence.[9]

The Vision 2047 document outlines a meticulously phased approach to military transformation, recognizing that technological sovereignty and institutional jointness must be built incrementally. Phase I, spanning from the present to 2030, is termed the "Era of Transition." It focuses on organizational restructuring for multi-domain operations, establishing jointness among the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and exercising positive control over the Line of Control (LoC) and Line of Actual Control (LAC).[10] Phase II, from 2030 to 2040, is the "Era of Consolidation." Termed the "Tech Leap," this phase aims to achieve data-driven operations, integrating space and cyber capabilities into traditional domains to operationalize the national air defence shield, Mission Sudarshan Chakra.[11] Finally, Phase III, from 2040 to 2047, represents the "Era of Excellence," focusing on achieving global technological leadership, enabling the armed forces to dominate the

electromagnetic spectrum, and conducting seamless intelligence-centric warfare.[12]

Central to this transformation is the ongoing effort to establish Integrated Theatre Commands, an initiative spearheaded by the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) under the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)[13]. Moving away from fragmented, service-specific commands, theatreisation seeks to optimize resources and integrate processes across all operational domains[14]. Proposed commands, such as the Western Theatre Command and the Maritime Theatre Command, will require a unified, single-pane-of-glass view of the battlespace[15].

The Defence Geospatial Agency (DGA)

To support this theatreisation and multi-domain operational capability, Vision 2047 mandates the establishment of the Defence Geospatial Agency (DGA), alongside a Data Force, a Drone Force, and a Cognitive Warfare Action Force.[16] The DGA represents a critical organizational evolution. Historically, geospatial data in India has been managed in silos by various civil and military agencies, leading to delayed intelligence fusion. The DGA aims to centralize the acquisition, fusion, and dissemination of high-resolution satellite intelligence, topographic data, and multi-sensor inputs into a coherent operational picture.[17]

By creating the DGA, India acknowledges that the speed of modern warfare requires an Intelligence-Centric Warfare model. The traditional Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop must be drastically shortened. When raw imagery is collected by space assets, processed by the Data Force using advanced data analytics, and disseminated through the DGA, frontline commanders in integrated theatres receive actionable intelligence at machine speed.[18] This structural reform is intended to mitigate the vulnerabilities of legacy systems and ensure that India can operate effectively against adversaries deploying drone swarms, stealth technology, and space-based kinetic weapons.[19]

Institutional Architecture of India's GEOINT Ecosystem

The effectiveness of Geospatial Intelligence relies not just on the technical specifications of satellites and sensors, but on the institutional architecture that processes, analyses, and translates raw data into strategic foresight. India has developed a complex matrix of agencies to handle these tasks, blending civilian space capabilities with highly specialized military intelligence units.

National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO)

Established in 2004 in the direct aftermath of the 1999 Kargil War a conflict that severely exposed India's lack of technical intelligence capabilities along its high-altitude frontiers the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) operates directly under the National Security Advisor and the Prime Minister's Office.[20] Unlike the Intelligence Bureau (IB) or the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), the NTRO was established via an executive order rather than parliamentary legislation, granting it immense operational flexibility to focus exclusively on technical intelligence collection.[21]

As India's apex technical intelligence agency, the NTRO acts as a "super-feeder" organization, providing decrypted and analysed technical leads to other intelligence branches and the Armed Forces.[22] The organization's mandate is heavily reliant on GEOINT, SIGINT (Signals Intelligence), and CYBINT (Cyber Intelligence), intentionally avoiding human intelligence (HUMINT) operations to maintain its specialized focus.[23] The NTRO processes data from satellites such as Cartosat and Resourcesat, translating raw spatial data into comprehensive intelligence reports regarding border deployments, terrorist infrastructure, and adversary electronic emissions.[24] The agency also operates sophisticated platforms, including high-altitude unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), terrestrial monitoring stations, and maritime assets like the ocean surveillance ship INS Dhruv.[25]

Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) and DIPAC

Operating under the Integrated Defence Staff, the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) was established in 2002 to coordinate intelligence activities across the Army, Navy, and Air

Force.[26] Under the DIA's purview is the Defence Image Processing and Analysis Centre (DIPAC), the military's dedicated hub for imagery intelligence (IMINT).[27]

DIPAC is responsible for interpreting imagery from satellite and aerial sources, providing processed visuals critical for target identification and battle damage assessment (BDA).[28] While historically reliant on the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) civilian Earth Observation satellites, DIPAC has increasingly utilized dedicated military payloads and commercial satellite imagery to fill operational gaps.[29] Furthermore, DIPAC actively engages in advanced cybersecurity training protocols, focusing on securing imagery intelligence systems against AI manipulation, satellite data breaches, and deepfakes.[30] This reflects a growing recognition within the Indian military establishment of the threat of cognitive warfare and data poisoning.

Defence Space Agency (DSA) and Civil-Military Fusion

In recognizing that space is no longer a benign sanctuary but an active warfighting domain, India established the Defence Space Agency (DSA) in 2018, headquartered in Bengaluru.[31] The DSA is India's first dedicated tri-service military organization responsible for coordinating space-related activities, absorbing the functions of the erstwhile Integrated Space Cell.[32] Its mandate includes developing military space doctrine, coordinating operational requirements, enhancing space situational awareness (SSA), and supporting the development of counter-space capabilities.[33] The strategic mindset shift driving the DSA was catalysed by India's successful Anti-Satellite (ASAT) weapon test in 2019 under Mission Shakti, signalling a transition from passive reliance on space assets to active space deterrence.[34]

Complementing the DSA is the Defence Space Research Organisation (DSRO), established to bridge the gap between scientific research institutions and immediate defence requirements.[35] This push for military-civil fusion is further highlighted by initiatives like the ISpA-DSA DefSpace Capability Dialogue. Held in early 2026, this dialogue brought together the DSA and over 45 private Indian space companies to align the armed forces' short- and long-term capability requirements ranging from Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) to Positioning, Navigation, and Timing (PNT)

with the technological readiness of the domestic private sector.[36] This collaborative approach is vital for breaking down traditional defence procurement bottlenecks and fostering an agile, indigenous defence-space ecosystem.

Defence Geoinformatics Research Establishment (DGRE)

In the continental theatre, particularly across the treacherous heights of the Himalayas, terrain intelligence is as critical as monitoring enemy troop movements. The Defence Geoinformatics Research Establishment (DGRE), a DRDO laboratory headquartered in Chandigarh, provides cutting-edge terrain intelligent solutions.[37] Formed by merging the Snow & Avalanche Study Establishment (SASE) and the Defence Terrain Research Laboratory (DTRL), DGRE focuses on mountain geo-hazard mapping, monitoring, and mitigation.[38]

For troops stationed along the LoC in Kashmir or the LAC in Ladakh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh, the environment itself is a lethal adversary. DGRE employs multi-source remote sensing data optical, thermal, and microwave to map and monitor avalanches and landslides.[39] By utilizing a network of over 348 Automatic Weather Stations (AWS) and integrating this with geospatial tools, DGRE generates near real-time avalanche warning bulletins.[40] The agency also collaborates closely with academic institutions; for instance, establishing Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with institutes like NIT Sikkim to install Doppler Weather Radars and radiometers to enhance micro-level weather prediction in the eastern Himalayas.[41] This highly specialized application of GEOINT ensures the safe mobility of troops and the resilience of border infrastructure in some of the most inhospitable terrains on Earth.

Orbital Assets: The Space-Based Eyes of the Military

The transition from a continental force to an aerospace-integrated military power is heavily predicated on India's satellite infrastructure. Historically, ISRO focused primarily on civilian applications such as agriculture, urban planning, and disaster management. However, the rapidly changing security environment has necessitated a realignment, leading to the development and deployment of dedicated military space assets.

The Current Strategic Satellite Constellation

India's current military space architecture comprises a mix of dedicated strategic satellites and dual-purpose Earth Observation satellites. As of recent assessments, India operates a robust fleet with direct military utility, leveraging various bands of the electromagnetic spectrum to ensure comprehensive surveillance.

Satellite Series / Name	Primary Sensor Modality	Orbit Type	Military Application / Strategic Value
Cartosat-2 & 3 Series	Electro-Optical (Optical/PAN)	Sun-Synchronous Polar	High-resolution cartography and IMINT. Cartosat-3 offers highly agile panchromatic resolution up to 0.25 meters. Crucial for border monitoring, target identification, and mapping terrorist infrastructure.[42]
RISAT Series (1, 2, 2BR1)	Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR)	Low Earth Orbit (LEO)	Provides day-night, all-weather visibility. Essential for tracking maritime assets, monitoring ground

			forces under heavy cloud cover, and detecting structural changes in contested zones.[43]
GSAT-7 (Rukmini)	Communications (UHF, S, C, Ku)	Geostationary (GEO)	India's first dedicated military satellite. Provides secure, real-time networking for the Indian Navy, linking warships, submarines, and aircraft across a 2,000 nm footprint over the IOR.[44]
GSAT-7A (Angry Bird)	Communications (Ku band)	Geostationary (GEO)	Dedicated to the Indian Air Force and Army Aviation. Interlinks ground radars, AWACS, drones, and fighter aircraft, significantly enhancing network-centric warfare capabilities.[45]

EMISAT (Project Kautilya)	Electronic Intelligence (ELINT)	Sun-Synchronous Polar	Intercepts directed microwave transmissions to map, track, and locate enemy radar emitters, providing strategic situational awareness of adversary electronic deployments.[46]
EOS Series (e.g., EOS-04)	Microwave/SAR & Optical	Various	Rebranded continuation of the Earth Observation fleet, providing multi-spectral and radar data for disaster management and secondary military surveillance.[47]

Table1: Different GEOINT Sat

Space-Based Surveillance Phase-III (SBS-III)

Recognizing the limitations of legacy systems such as the inability to image targets under heavy cloud cover or the lengthy revisit times of older satellites that allowed adversaries to move assets undetected the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) approved the Space-Based Surveillance Phase-III (SBS-III) project in 2024.[48] Valued at approximately Rs. 26,968 crore (USD 3.2 billion), SBS-III is a transformative leap, aiming

to deploy a massive constellation of 52 advanced surveillance and communication satellites by 2029, with initial launches expedited to 2026.[49]

This project marks a fundamental departure from total reliance on state-run space agencies. Under the SBS-III framework, 21 satellites will be built by ISRO, while the remaining 31 will be developed by private sector companies, stimulating India's nascent defence-space industrial base.[50] The operational command of the SBS-III constellation will fall under the Defence Space Agency (DSA).[51]

The SBS-III constellation will fundamentally alter India's GEOINT capabilities through several critical technological insertions:

- **AI-Enabled Autonomy and Inter-Satellite Links:** The satellites will feature onboard AI for autonomous detection and inter-satellite communication. If a geostationary satellite detects anomalous strategic movement, it can autonomously task a lower-orbit LEO satellite to capture high-resolution imagery and relay the prioritized data directly to ground stations, bypassing massive, time-consuming raw data downloads.[52]
- **Persistent Surveillance Mesh:** Legacy satellites like Cartosat-2C had revisit times of up to four days. By deploying a denser mesh of 52 satellites utilizing both SAR and electro-optical sensors, the revisit time over critical geographies (such as the LAC or maritime choke points) will be reduced to near-continuous coverage, shrinking the OODA loop and allowing for the real-time cueing of air defence assets under Mission Sudarshan Chakra.[53]
- **Quantum Communication:** The program envisions incorporating quantum encryption capabilities, utilizing the principles of quantum mechanics to secure data transmissions, rendering them practically immune to interception or decryption by adversaries during electronic warfare.[54]
- **Launch-on-Demand Resilience:** The DSA is pursuing rapid-response mobile launch platforms using Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) technology. In a conflict scenario where an adversary employs Anti-Satellite (ASAT) weapons to blind Indian ISR, the military aims to replenish orbital assets within 60 minutes, ensuring the unbroken resilience of its GEOINT network.[55]

Private Sector Integration: The TSAT-1A Precedent

The drive toward military-civil fusion and reliance on the private space sector is exemplified by the successful deployment of the TSAT-1A satellite in April 2024.[56] Developed through a strategic partnership between Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL) and the US-based earth observation company Satellogic, TSAT-1A was launched via a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket.[57]

TSAT-1A is a sub-meter resolution electro-optical satellite that carries both Multispectral Imaging (MSI) and Hyperspectral Imaging (HSI) payloads.[58] This dual-payload approach is highly strategic. MSI provides medium-resolution data on broad geographic features like land use, forest cover, and infrastructure. Conversely, HSI captures data across hundreds to thousands of narrow spectral bands, identifying the exact material composition of targets. This capability allows military analysts to distinguish real foliage from camouflage netting over missile batteries, or determine the structural composition of a runway.[59]

The Satellogic-TASL partnership highlights a successful division of labour: Satellogic provided the expertise in payload development, while TASL utilized its Vemagal facility in Karnataka for Assembly, Integration, and Testing (AIT).[60] This collaboration not only mitigates India's historical dependence on foreign commercial entities for high-grade IMINT but also serves as a critical blueprint for how domestic defence start-ups can build Sovereign capabilities.[61]

Navigational Autonomy: The Strategic Role of NavIC

Geospatial Intelligence is inherently tied to absolute locational accuracy. Without precise positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) data, the deployment of precision-guided munitions, the synchronization of secure communication networks, and the coordination of multi-domain assets become impossible.

During the 1999 Kargil War, the United States denied India access to precise, military-grade GPS data, severely impeding the Indian military's ability to accurately target entrenched enemy positions in the high-altitude terrain.[62] This strategic vulnerability

served as the catalyst for the development of the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS), operationally known as NavIC (Navigation with Indian Constellation).[63]

Orbital Architecture and Tactical Advantages

NavIC comprises a constellation of seven operational satellites: three located in Geostationary Orbit (GEO) at longitudes 32.5° E, 83° E, and 131.5° E, and four in inclined Geosynchronous Orbit (GSO) crossing the equator at 55° E and 111.75° E.[64] The system provides coverage over the entire Indian landmass and a region extending 1,500 km beyond its borders.[65]

For the armed forces, NavIC provides a Restricted Service (RS) an encrypted channel available only to authorized military users. While the civilian Standard Positioning Service (SPS) offers accuracy within 5 to 10 meters, the military Restricted Service offers position accuracy ranging from 0.5 to 5 meters.[66]

The specific orbital design of NavIC offers distinct, physics-based tactical advantages over the US Global Positioning System (GPS), particularly in the complex topography of the Indian subcontinent.

Feature Comparison	**NavIC (India)**	**GPS (United States)**
Constellation Size	7 Satellites (Regional Focus)	31+ Satellites (Global Focus).[67]
Orbit Types	Geostationary (GEO) & Geosynchronous (GSO)	Medium Earth Orbit (MEO)
Signal Penetration Angle	High angle/Vertical line-of-sight (penetrates deep valleys and urban	Lower angle (susceptible to terrain blocking in mountainous regions).[68]

	canyons)	
Frequency Bands	Dual frequency (L5, S-band, plus L1 in newer satellites)	Historically single frequency (L-band).[69]
Atmospheric Error Correction	Autonomous (calculates delay difference between dual bands)	Relies on frequently updated atmospheric models.[70]
Positional Accuracy	0.5 to 5 meters (Military RS in India)	~20 meters (Standard global variance).[71]

Table 2: NavIC vs GPS

Because the NavIC GSO satellites trace a continuous "figure-8" path directly over the Indian landmass, and the GEO satellites remain fixed, the navigation signals arrive at a steep, near-90-degree angle.[72] This vertical line-of-sight ensures that signals penetrate deep Himalayan valleys and dense forest canopies far more effectively than GPS satellites, which transmit from Medium Earth Orbit (MEO) and often get blocked by surrounding terrain.[73] Furthermore, NavIC's dual-frequency capability (L5 and S-band) allows the system to autonomously correct for ionospheric disturbances by measuring the delay differences between the two bands, eliminating the need for external atmospheric correction models.[74]

The Atomic Clock Crisis and Technological Resilience

The precision of satellite navigation relies entirely on the synchronization of onboard atomic clocks; a signal travels 5 meters in roughly 16 nanoseconds, meaning any drift in timing catastrophically degrades positional accuracy.[75] NavIC faced a severe crisis between 2016 and 2017 when imported rubidium atomic clocks (sourced from the Swiss

company SpectraTime) began failing systematically across multiple first-generation IRNSS satellites.[76] By 2026, the constellation was operating below its optimum capacity, degrading the accuracy of the grid.[77]

However, ISRO demonstrated significant technological resilience by launching replacement satellites, beginning with the NVS-01 in 2023.[78] Crucially, these next-generation satellites are equipped with indigenously developed rubidium atomic clocks, eliminating dependence on imported frequency standards.[79] Furthermore, the integration of NavIC capabilities into indigenous microprocessors (such as the AJIT processor developed by IIT Bombay) ensures that the hardware ecosystem supporting the military's PNT requirements remains entirely under sovereign control.[80]

Maritime Domain Awareness: Securing the Indo-Pacific Blue Economy

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is the geopolitical centre of gravity for global trade and energy transit. It is characterized by vital maritime choke points, including the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab-al-Mandab.[81] India's shifting focus toward the maritime domain is enshrined in the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and MAHASAGAR doctrines, which aim to position India as a Net Security Provider, a first responder in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), and a stabilizing power fostering the "Blue Economy".[82]

However, the sheer vastness of India's maritime area of interest managing a 7,500 km coastline and a 2.37 million sq. km Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), alongside monitoring the 3.8 million sq. km Arabian Sea makes physical patrolling by naval vessels and Coast Guard cutters entirely insufficient.[83] To address traditional threats (state-on-state conflict, expanding Chinese naval presence) and non-traditional threats (piracy, illegal fishing, human trafficking, and arms smuggling), India relies on an integrated GEOINT and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) architecture.[84]

Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and IMAC

Established in 2018 in Gurugram, the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) acts as the collaborative regional hub for maritime information exchange.[85] The

IFC-IOR operates in tandem with the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC), which was commissioned in 2014 as a direct response to the intelligence failures that preceded the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.[86]

IMAC forms the core of the National Command Control and Communication and Intelligence Network (NC3IN).[87] It functions as a massive data fusion hub, integrating real-time inputs from an Integrated Coastal Surveillance System (ICSS) comprising 46+ static coastal radars, Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), space-based AIS data from Resourcesat satellites, and hydrographic surveys.[88]

To build a comprehensive Common Operating Picture (COP), the IFC-IOR hosts International Liaison Officers (ILOs) from partner nations and leverages "White Shipping Agreements" with over 20 countries to track the movements of commercial non-military vessels.[89] By fusing these diverse spatial datasets into unified Geographic Information System (GIS) dashboards, analysts can apply machine learning algorithms to detect behavioral anomalies.[90] If a vessel loiters near sensitive coastal installations, deviates inexplicably from its declared route, or engages in suspicious rendezvous patterns, the system automatically triggers alerts, enabling the Indian Navy and Coast Guard to task patrol assets for rapid interception.[91]

Combating "Dark Shipping" via Space-Based RF and AI

One of the most persistent and complex threats in the IOR is the phenomenon of "dark shipping" vessels that deliberately turn off their AIS transponders to mask illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, arms smuggling, or covert naval operations.[92] Traditional optical satellites struggle to track these vessels continuously due to cloud cover, weather conditions, and limited swath width.

To counter this, India is advancing towards space-based Radio Frequency (RF) mapping. The operational premise is that even when a ship disables its AIS, its navigation radars, communication radios, and internal electronic systems continue to emit electromagnetic signals.[93] Suppressing these emissions entirely is nearly impossible without crippling the ship's ability to safely navigate. Satellites equipped with sensitive RF payloads can

intercept these emissions from low earth orbit. By utilizing onboard AI algorithms, this system can instantly pinpoint the location of the signals, identify the specific type of equipment emitting them, and match them against known vessel behaviours.[94]

This technology effectively fuses Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) with Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) into a single operational picture.[95] For the Indian Navy, this passive mapping capability is revolutionary. It allows naval command centres to track adversary fleets or unmarked logistics vessels continuously without emitting active radar signals that would reveal their own positions a critical advantage in contested waters.[96]

This sovereign technological capability is augmented by multilateral diplomatic and security efforts, notably the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). Launched in 2022 by India, the US, Japan, and Australia, IPMDA harnesses commercial satellite RF data to provide near real-time tracking of dark shipping across Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and the IOR, bringing unprecedented transparency to critical waterways and deterring illicit activities by state and non-state actors.[97] Furthermore, India’s interoperability is enhanced by connecting with other regional Information Sharing Platforms (ISPs) like SeaVision and the EU-funded IORIS network.[98]

Continental Vigilance: Border Security and Tactical Engagements

While the maritime domain represents India's expanding strategic horizons and geoeconomic interests, its continental borders demand immediate, continuous, and highly tactical vigilance. The Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China are characterized by harsh terrain, ambiguous demarcations, and historical volatility. Here, GEOINT transitions from a strategic monitoring tool to a direct tactical enabler, deciding the outcome of border standoffs and counter-terrorism operations.

The Sino-Indian Border: Doklam, Galwan, and "Salami Slicing"

The utility of satellite imagery in exposing and countering adversary strategies was prominently displayed during the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020-2021 Galwan Valley

clashes.[99]

In Doklam, Chinese forces attempted to construct a road toward the Jampheri ridge, a strategic vantage point overlooking India's highly vulnerable Siliguri Corridor (the "Chicken's Neck" connecting the northeastern states to the rest of India).[100] Indian troops physically intervened to halt the construction, leading to a tense months-long standoff.[101]

However, while the physical confrontation was resolved diplomatically, subsequent geospatial analysis by independent researchers and military intelligence revealed a profound shift in Chinese tactics: a strategy of "salami-slicing" through rapid, uncontested infrastructure development. High-resolution satellite imagery sourced from commercial providers like Maxar exposed the construction of "Pangda," a fully inhabited Chinese village built approximately 9 km east of the original Doklam standoff site, squarely inside Bhutanese territory along the Amo Chu river.[102]

GEOINT confirmed that Beijing was attempting to establish legitimacy over the disputed area through civilian settlement, outflanking Indian defences by approaching the Jampheri ridge through an alternate axis.[103] The satellite images clearly showed all-weather carriageways, newly constructed bridges, and excavation activities, demonstrating China's ability to alter the facts on the ground while avoiding direct kinetic conflict.[104]

Similarly, during the deadly Galwan skirmishes in Eastern Ladakh in 2020, Chinese military buildups, temporary structures, and troop deployments were meticulously tracked via satellite imagery.[105] These events highlighted a critical lesson for the Indian military establishment: the adversary acts swiftly, and continuous, all-weather surveillance (particularly using SAR satellites capable of penetrating the region's frequent cloud cover) is required to prevent strategic surprises. The subsequent fast-tracking of the SBS-III satellite constellation was a direct consequence of the intelligence gaps recognized during the Ladakh crisis.[106]

Pre-emptive Strikes and Counter-Terrorism: The Balakot Operation

On the Western Front, GEOINT plays an indispensable role in counter-terrorism and low-intensity conflict operations. The evolution of India's retaliatory posture can be observed by comparing the 2016 Uri response with the 2019 Pulwama response.

Feature	**2016 Surgical Strikes (Post-Uri)**	**2019 Aerial Strikes (Post-Pulwama)**
Response Type	Ground-based special operations	Aerial precision strike (Operation Bandar)[107]
Depth of Penetration	Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (Launch pads along the LoC)	Balakot, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Deep within sovereign Pakistani territory).[108]
Resources Employed	Army Para Special Forces	IAF Mirage-2000 & SU-30MKI fighters with precision-guided munitions.[109]
GEOINT Role	Topographic mapping for infiltration/exfiltration routes	ELINT for radar evasion; IMINT for target selection and Battle Damage Assessment.[110]

Table 3: Comparison of Post URI and Post Pulwama

Following the Pulwama terror attack in 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) executed a precision aerial strike on a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) training camp in Balakot, Pakistan. This marked a significant escalation, being the first time Indian warplanes crossed the

LoC since the 1971 war.[111]

The planning and execution of such a deep-penetration strike relied entirely on multi-domain intelligence fusion. Satellites operated by NTRO (such as the Cartosat series) provided the necessary high-resolution topographic data of the target area, confirming the layout of the terrorist facility.[112] Concurrently, ELINT satellites mapped the coverage and operational frequencies of Pakistani air defence systems, allowing IAF Mirage-2000 fighters to chart an ingress route that minimized the risk of detection and interception.[113]

Post-strike, satellite imagery was extensively utilized for Battle Damage Assessment (BDA). However, varying interpretations of open-source commercial imagery led to conflicting international narratives regarding the extent of the damage inflicted upon the facility, with some analysts claiming the munitions missed the primary structures, while Indian authorities maintained the targets were successfully struck internally.[114] This incident underscores a critical modern reality: in the information age, control over the geospatial narrative and the ability to definitively prove operational success through imagery is as vital as the kinetic strike itself.

Geopolitical Alignments: The BECA Paradigm and Strategic Autonomy

India's quest for geospatial superiority is not occurring in a geopolitical vacuum. It is heavily influenced by its deepening strategic alignment with the United States, driven by a mutual need to counterbalance Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. A cornerstone of this relationship was the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for Geospatial Intelligence in 2020, representing the finalization of four foundational military pacts.[115]

The Foundational Agreements

The signing of these agreements has progressively integrated the operational capabilities of the Indian and US militaries:

Foundational Agreement	Year Signed	Primary Function / Scope	Impact on India's Defense Capabilities
GSOMIA	2002	General Security of Military Information	Allows sharing of classified military intelligence; forms the baseline of institutional trust.[116]
LEMOA	2016	Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement	Mutual access to military bases for refueling and repairs; dramatically enhances the operational reach of the Indian Navy.[117]
COMCASA	2018	Communications Compatibility and Security	Enables transfer of highly encrypted communication equipment; allows seamless tactical interoperability between armed forces.[118]
BECA	2020	Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement	Sharing of maps, nautical charts, and precision unclassified/classified satellite data for targeting and navigation.[119]

Table 4: MOU between Indian and US militaries

Operational Implications and the Paradox of Autonomy

BECA allows for the exchange of geospatial products between India and the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA).[120] For the Indian military, the operational implications are profound. BECA provides real-time access to high-fidelity US satellite data and advanced GPS enhancements, which drastically improves the navigational accuracy of automated hardware, long-range cruise missiles, and armed drones.[121] Furthermore, signing BECA was a prerequisite for India to acquire highly sensitive US military hardware, such as the MQ-9B SeaGuardian Unmanned Aerial Systems, which rely entirely on secure geospatial and communication links to operate.[122]

However, this integration presents a paradox regarding India's cherished doctrine of strategic autonomy. By synchronizing its geospatial, communication, and targeting systems with those of the US, critics argue that India risks allowing Washington to enter its internal decision-making loop.[123] Furthermore, India's historical reliance on Russian defence equipment which still comprises an estimated 60-70% of its inventory creates significant diplomatic and technical friction, as the US fears exposing its sensitive geospatial data and encrypted networks to Russian-origin platforms.[124] Consequently, India must carefully balance the immediate tactical leverage provided by BECA with the long-term imperative of building indigenous capabilities through initiatives like *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-Reliant India) to ensure its foreign policy remains independent of major power rivalries.[125]

Emerging Technologies: AI-GEOINT and the Zero-Trust Imperative

As the commercial space sector expands and artificial intelligence matures, the nature of GEOINT is shifting from a tightly controlled state monopoly to a democratised, highly contested arena. The global proliferation of satellites and geospatial analytics firms means that intelligence is more accessible, but also more vulnerable to manipulation.

The Vulnerability of Commercial "Shutter Control"

To fill sovereign data gaps, India's armed forces have increasingly integrated data from global commercial satellite providers such as Planet, Maxar, BlackSky, and Airbus.[126]

However, this reliance introduces the critical strategic risk of "shutter control." Foreign commercial providers, influenced by their host nation's regulatory frameworks (such as the US Kyl-Bingaman Amendment or ITAR regulations), can voluntarily or legally impose moratoriums on the sale or distribution of imagery over specific conflict zones to prevent adversaries from utilizing their data for tactical actions.[127]

If such shutter controls are imposed during a Sino-Indian border crisis, a maritime conflict, or a regional disaster, India's military could be effectively blinded, losing access to critical high-resolution data.[128] Consequently, the Defence Geospatial Agency must prioritize securing sovereign tasking authority over dedicated constellations like SBS-III, ensuring that national security operations are entirely insulated from the regulatory frameworks or corporate decisions of foreign states.[129]

AI Annotation and the Threat of Data Spoofing

Artificial Intelligence is revolutionizing GEOINT through the process of "AI annotation." Advanced systems rapidly process vast quantities of incoming raw imagery, automatically identifying, labelling, and classifying military targets distinguishing, for instance, between a civilian truck and a mobile missile launcher.[130] This speed enables autonomous weapon systems, or those operating with a human in the loop, to strike with unprecedented precision. Furthermore, commercial entities like Esri are providing the defence sector with GIS software (such as ArcGIS) capable of creating complex digital twins of the battlespace, allowing commanders to run predictive analytics at all echelons of command.[131]

However, the integration of AI introduces the severe threat of data manipulation and cognitive warfare. AI can be weaponized by adversaries to deliberately spoof or forge geospatial imagery, creating deepfakes of the physical landscape designed to disorient an adversary's OODA loop, conceal troop movements, and fuel disinformation campaigns.[132]

In response to this emerging threat, the Indian Armed Forces are compelled to adopt a strict "zero-trust" principle when handling GEOINT.[133] Under a zero-trust architecture, no

raw or processed imagery is assumed to be authentic simply because it originates from a satellite. Every data packet must be cryptographically verified and cross-referenced with multiple independent sensor inputs for example, comparing optical satellite imagery with ground-based radar, SIGINT, and aerial drone feeds before it forms the basis of actionable intelligence.[134] In future conflicts, victory will not solely depend on who possesses superior kinetic firepower, but on who controls, verifies, and ultimately trusts the digital image of the battlefield.[135]

Conclusion

The integration of Geospatial Intelligence into India's defence decision-making represents a fundamental and necessary evolution in its strategic posture. Moving away from a traditionally reactive, hardware-centric approach, India is actively embracing an intelligence-centric doctrine capable of executing complex multi-domain operations.

The establishment of the Defence Geospatial Agency (DGA) and the ambitious Space-Based Surveillance Phase-III (SBS-III) project signify a decisive pivot toward technological sovereignty and persistent situational awareness. By deploying a vast mesh of AI-enabled satellites and securing navigational autonomy through the NavIC constellation, India is drastically shortening its decision cycles, ensuring that tactical commanders have real-time, verified intelligence across all theatres of operation.

In the maritime domain, institutional structures like the IFC-IOR and IMAC have positioned India as a proactive security provider in the Indian Ocean. By utilizing advanced space-based Radio Frequency capabilities and AI algorithms, India is piercing the veil of "dark shipping" and countering covert maritime threats. On the continental front, the harsh realities of the Himalayas mandate continuous vigilance, where terrain intelligence provided by agencies like DGRE and high-resolution commercial imagery dictate the success of border deployments and pre-emptive strikes.

While strategic partnerships, notably the BECA agreement with the United States, have provided immediate access to advanced targeting data and fostered interoperability, India remains acutely aware of the vulnerabilities inherent in dependency. The looming threats

of commercial shutter control and AI-driven data spoofing necessitate a robust "zero-trust" geospatial ecosystem.

Ultimately, Vision 2047 recognizes that India's ascent as a global power requires a military backed by absolute informational superiority. By fostering civil-military fusion, leveraging private sector innovation, and maintaining an unwavering focus on indigenous capabilities, India is ensuring that its armed forces not only see the battlespace but dominate it.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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