

THE POLITICS OF FOOD AID: A BATTLEGROUND BETWEEN HUMAN SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY INTERESTS

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Abstract: Theoretically, food assistance aims to uphold human security by reducing hunger and malnutrition, particularly in countries affected by climate change. However, in practice, it is frequently instrumentalized as a tool of donor states' foreign policy, creating tensions between the needs of recipients and the political agendas of donors. This study seeks to analyze how foreign policy interests such as strengthening strategic alliances, stabilizing geopolitical regions, and opening new markets influence the allocation, timing, and conditionalities of food aid, and to assess their impact on the core principles of human security. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, employing secondary data collection methods derived from various literature sources, including academic journals, newspapers, and reports from international humanitarian organizations. The collected data are analyzed using the conceptual framework of the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid. This study uses Russia's distribution of food aid to six African countries namely Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Mali, Eritrea, the Central African Republic, and Somalia, while disregarding other African nations also facing acute food insecurity due to climate-induced drought as the case to analyze. This study finds that foreign policy considerations often serve as stronger predictors of food aid allocation than actual humanitarian need. This politicization results in delayed assistance, uneven distribution, and the imposition of conditionalities that prioritize donor economic and political objectives over the resolution of local food insecurity. As the conclusion, the instrumentalization of food aid as a foreign policy tool fundamentally undermines its primary purpose of enhancing human security. It compromises core humanitarian principles such as neutrality and impartiality, and reveals a significant gap between humanitarian rhetoric and operational realities on the ground.

Keywords: food aid, human security, foreign policy, food security, food assistance, national interest

Introduction

Food aid is a term used to indicate the transfer of food commodities from one country to another within a predetermined timeframe. Such provisions may include cereals, vegetable oils, dairy products, and other items that support the sustenance and livelihoods of recipient populations. Food aid is commonly

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classified into three categories: emergency food aid, project food aid, and programmatic (or structural) food aid. Emergency food aid is supplied in response to acute food insecurity caused by natural or human-made disasters; project food aid is delivered as part of development initiatives or specific programs in the recipient state; and programmatic or structural food aid involves the transfer of food for subsequent sale in domestic markets (Uvin, 1992).

In recent years the world has faced not only social disasters such as armed conflict but also natural disasters that are increasingly driven by climate change. Floods and droughts have become more frequent and directly undermine household livelihoods. Climate-induced crop failures can precipitate heightened levels of hunger, malnutrition, starvation, and even death, which renders food aid particularly emergency food aid more essential than before.

Climate-driven crop failure is a primary driving factor of food crises, the most extreme expression of food insecurity in a given region. A food crisis is typically the end point of a sequence of interrelated effects caused by diminished physical availability of food and reduced social and economic access to it. These domino effects include rapidly depleting household food stocks, the forced sale of productive assets (for example, livestock) to purchase food, declining income opportunities, and weakening trade networks dynamics that together cause food prices to surge (Martin & Owen, 2014).

A salient contemporary example is the food insecurity experienced across Africa especially in Sub-Saharan countries which is driven in part by climate change and has been exacerbated by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Because both countries are major exporters of wheat and other cereals, disruptions in their production and trade can amplify food insecurity in highly import-dependent regions. The following figure shows graph of hazards in the African region which contribute to the disruption of food production.

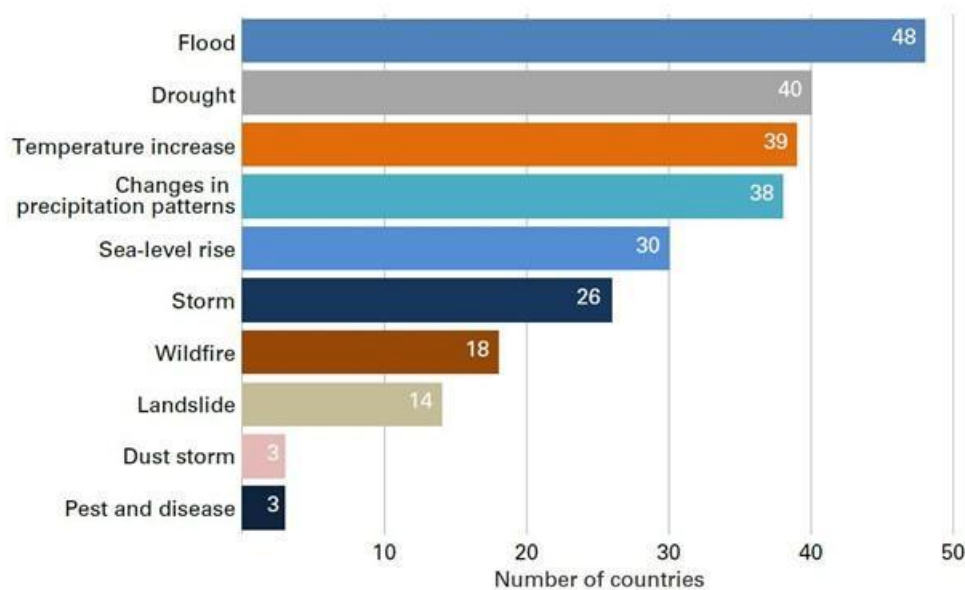


Figure 1: Graph of hazards in the African region generated by the NDCs of 53 countries in Africa (World Meteorological Organization, 2024)

According to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) data, an estimated 868 million people in Africa suffer from food insecurity. The five countries with the highest prevalence of food insecurity for 2020–2022 were Sierra Leone (89.2%), the Congo (88.2%), South Sudan (87.2%), Malawi (82.4%), and the Central African Republic (81.3%) (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023).

To mitigate these shortfalls, Russia an exporter directly implicated in the Russia–Ukraine conflict and a non-traditional donor delivered 200,000 metric tons of grain to six African states during 2023–2024: Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Mali, Eritrea, the Central African Republic, and Somalia (Klomegah, 2024). At this point, problem starts to emerge. Russian recipient lists diverge from the data of countries most impacted from food insecurity provided by the FAO. This mismatch suggests the possibility that Russia’s food aid was politicized that is, motivated less by a moral responsibility to alleviate food insecurity and more by specific foreign-policy objectives. To investigate this contention, the question proposed in this research is: “How do foreign-policy interests influence the allocation, timing, and conditionalities of food aid?”

Russia is selected as the case study because it represents an emerging, non-traditional donor, to fill the gap left open by prior researches which have only concentrated on the motivations and instrumentalization of humanitarian aid by traditional donors in the post-Cold War. This paper therefore seeks to examine in greater depth how Russia’s foreign-policy interests shape its food-aid provision and how those dynamics relate to broader concerns of human security. The study aims to deepen the understanding of how contemporary foreign-policy interests shape food-aid allocation, timing, and conditionalities.

Literature Review

Food insecurity is the antithesis of food security. According to the World Food Summit, food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Martin & Owen, 2014). Food security is threatened when either supplies are physically insufficient, or when food is available but economically inaccessible to large segments of the population. Food security itself constitutes one dimension of human security, a human-centered security approach articulated in the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report. Human security seeks to protect individuals and communities from threats to their well-being and physical safety (Andersen-Rodgers & Crawford, 2023).

The human-security approach was developed on the basis of two core recognitions: the universality of human rights and the centrality of human development. Its proponents hoped that states and the international community would both promote and protect human rights and actively pursue human development (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). In traditional security paradigms, security primarily defined as freedom from threats to a state's territorial integrity or regional stability. Traditional security considers individual security is automatically secured by state security. In contrast, human security emphasizes fulfillment of individuals' basic needs, such as freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the freedom to live in dignity. Human security framework places individual and community security on a par with state security without conflating the two, and it conceptualizes the security of people and communities as global public goods, not as something exclusive and competitive.

As the consequence, the presence of the state is crucial for the realization of human security. In some cases, ineffective state institutions could pose a threat to their populations. At this juncture, the notion of dual sovereignty emerges: sovereignty in external terms respect for other states' sovereignty and sovereignty in internal terms, which encompasses respect for the dignity and rights of all citizens (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). Since human security is a global public good, international community bears a moral responsibility to assist in securing human security beyond its own geographic boundaries. This obligation rests on human-rights principles universality, independence, prevention-orientation, and a people-centered approach along with the recognition that insecurity in one country can have adverse transnational effects (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007).

When a state is unable or unwilling to fulfill its responsibilities, the international community holds two complementary duties: first, a responsibility to protect civilians and maintain collective security; and second, a responsibility to provide support through effective engagement and assistance (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). In the context of climate-driven food insecurity, a state may offer assistance to another state or to vulnerable groups within another state. Humanitarian intervention may be justified

when state policies produce instability that threatens the human security of citizens, or when crises such as natural disasters, famine, or major public-health emergencies occur. Because human-security threats are transboundary and interconnected, international involvement is no longer determined solely by geographic proximity (Andersen-Rodgers & Crawford, 2023).

According to (Levine et al. (2004), unconditional food distributions are appropriate under several circumstances: when households begin to lose access to food, when aggregate food availability is low and supplies are inelastic, and when alternative response mechanisms would be slower or impractical. Recent food crises many of which are exacerbated by climate change therefore reinforce the critical role of food aid, particularly emergency assistance (Andersen-Rodgers & Crawford, 2023). In such responses, regional organizations, international agencies, and states can serve as donor actors.

Materials and Methods

This research employs qualitative methodology, relying on secondary data drawn from a wide range of literature, such as academic journals, newspapers, and reports produced by the World Meteorological Organization, the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and other humanitarian actors. To analyze the data, this study applies Thomas G. Weiss's Instrumentalization of Humanitarian Aid framework (Weiss, 2014) to assess how humanitarian practice may be subordinated to political ends.

There are two reasons that justify the use of Weiss's framework in this study: (1) Weiss argues that humanitarian distribution is frequently instrumentalized when donor states use aid to pursue foreign-policy objectives. Powerful donors can leverage multilateral organizations by dictating how funds are spent or by directing the subcontracting of resources to particular local or international NGOs. This assumption is in line with this study's hypotheses. (2) Weiss identifies three primary modes of instrumentalization militarization, politicization, and marketization. This study assumes that there is a practice of politicization from Russia in selecting the recipient states because it is different from list of the countries most suffered from food insecurity in Africa in 2023-2024.

In this study, Russia is treated as an emerging non-traditional donor whose motivations for providing food aid are interrogated through the lens of politicization as described by Weiss. In line with Weiss's claim, the study proceeds from the premise that there is little meaningful difference between the motivations of Western and non-traditional donors when geopolitical interests are at stake: geopolitics often supersedes moral obligations and humanitarian principles because foreign policy is ultimately aimed at influencing or controlling the behavior of other states.

Table 1: Summary of data sources

No.	Type	Title and Writer	Relevance
1.	Journal	<p>“From the Global Food Crisis to the Age of Austerity: The Anxious Geopolitics of Global Food Security” written by Essex (2014)</p> <p>“Food Aid and the World Hunger Solution: Why the U.S. Should Use a Human Rights Approach” written by Marchione & Messer (2010)</p> <p>“Regime, Surplus, and Self-Interest: The International Politics of Food Aid” written by Uvin (1992)</p>	Provide the data regarding the implementation of Food Aid programs
2.	Report	<p>“Africa faces disproportionate burden from climate change and adaptation costs” published by World Meteorological Organization (2024)</p> <p>“Africa - Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023” published by Food and Agriculture Organization (2023)</p>	Provide the data about food insecurity and climate hazards in Africa in 2023-2024
3.	News	<p>Aljazeera</p> <p>Africa News</p> <p>DW</p> <p>BBC</p> <p>Le Monde</p> <p>CNN</p> <p>NBC News</p>	Provide the detail of Russia’s food aid programs declarations and its implementation
4.	Book	<p>“Human Security Theory and Action” (Second Edi) written by Andersen-Rodgers & Crawford (2023)</p> <p>“Routledge Handbook of Human Security” written by Martin & Owen (2014)</p> <p>“Human Security” written by Tadjbakhsh (2007)</p>	Foundations of theoretical framework

Results and Findings

Foreign Policy Motivations and Allocation Patterns

Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has been widely regarded as an antagonist in the contemporary geopolitical arena. Both Russia and Ukraine are among the world's largest grain suppliers. Disruptions in their production and trade can amplify food insecurity in highly import-dependent regions.

Africa is a salient contemporary example how the conflict, and the climate change is causing the food insecurity, especially in Sub-Saharan countries. According to the data by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), approximately 868 million people in Africa suffer from food insecurity. The five countries with the highest prevalence of food insecurity for 2020–2022 were Sierra Leone (89.2%), the Congo (88.2%), South Sudan (87.2%), Malawi (82.4%), and the Central African Republic (81.3%) (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023).

After facing mounting diplomatic and political pressure, Russia, on the other side, has sought to shore up diplomatic support from a range of states, from formally neutral actors to those openly critical of Western policy on the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Africa emerged as a key region for this outreach. Rather than relying primarily on bilateral military ties, Russia pursued multilateral engagement at the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit in St. Petersburg, where it announced the planned distribution of 200,000 metric tons of grain to six African states Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Mali, Eritrea, the Central African Republic, and Somalia (Klomegah, 2024). Several of these countries had legitimate human-security needs: Somalia and Eritrea, for example, relied on Russia and Ukraine for some 90–100% of their grain imports before the conflict, and the Horn of Africa was concurrently experiencing severe drought that left millions at risk of food insecurity (Ehl, 2023; Kitenge, 2023; Princewill, 2024).

Although Russia's grain deliveries were framed as a moral response to climate-exacerbated food shortages and the disruption of agricultural exports caused by the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the distribution pattern exhibits clear signs of politicization. A notable mismatch exists between Russia's chosen recipients and the countries with the highest prevalence of food insecurity: Sierra Leone (89.2%), the Congo (88.2%), South Sudan (87.2%), Malawi (82.4%), and the Central African Republic (81.3%) (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023).

Several pieces of evidence point to political selection criteria. First, five of the six recipient states Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali, Somalia, and Zimbabwe host substantial Russian military or economic footprints, frequently mediated by Wagner Group operations; Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, host Russian military advisers following coups that installed anti-Western

governments, and the Central African Republic exhibits extensive Wagner involvement in both security provision and resource extraction (Ehl, 2023; Inwood & Tacchi, 2024; Moeder, 2023).

Second, President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe one of the beneficiaries of a 25,000-ton grain allocation—noted that his country was already “food secure,” suggesting the shipment served more as political solidarity than emergency relief (Musvanhiri, 2024; Smith, 2023). As development economist Godfrey Kanyenze observed, Russia “realizes these countries are in need, and basically takes advantage of that specific need” for geopolitical ends (Klomegah, 2024). Taken together, these indicators suggest that recipient selection was driven primarily by political alignment, strategic value, and commodity dependency rather than by the objective severity of food insecurity (Klomegah, 2024; Princewill, 2024).

Timing and Conditionalities

The timing of Russia’s food-aid deliveries to Africa was also not accidental. This maneuver followed Moscow’s withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and was quickly accompanied by an announcement of “free grain” for Africa actions that reveal the strategic calculations underlying Russia’s humanitarian rhetoric. Russia terminated the grain deal on July 17, 2023, citing unmet demands for its own agricultural exports (Picheta et al., 2023; United Nations, 2023). Within days, at the Russia–Africa Summit in St. Petersburg on July 27, 2023, President Putin pledged 25,000–50,000 tons of grain to six African countries (Al Jazeera, 2023; Smith, 2023), and the first shipments to Somalia and Burkina Faso arrived in November 2023.

By withdrawing from the Black Sea Initiative, Russia effectively eliminated Ukraine’s capacity to export some 32.9 million metric tons of grain annually, exerting substantial pressure on global food markets (Le Monde, 2023); the UN estimated that the grain deal had reduced food prices by more than 23% since March 2022 (Nagurney, 2023). Russia’s immediate offer of 200,000 tons of “free grain” less than 1% of the disrupted Ukrainian exports therefore served multiple strategic purposes: signaling concern for African food security, deflecting criticism for ending the larger grain deal, and positioning Russia as a dependable alternative to Western aid providers (Klomegah, 2024).

This timing is consistent with a broader pattern of humanitarian instrumentalization. Russia routinely uses aid to reward political allies and advance geopolitical goals, with distribution patterns that correlate with UN voting behavior favorable to Moscow (Omelicheva, 2021). The recipients of Russian grain aid included several states that maintained neutral or pro-Russian stances on Ukraine Eritrea, for example, voted against UN resolutions calling for Russian troop withdrawal (Klomegah, 2024).

Conditionalities thus tended to be implicit rather than explicit, revolving around political alignment with Russia’s position on Ukraine and the strengthening of Moscow’s military and economic foothold on the continent, rather than being grounded solely in humanitarian need. In several post-coup states—

most notably Mali and Burkina Faso governments have explicitly turned away from Western partnerships in favor of Russian alternatives; for these regimes, Russian food aid confers domestic legitimacy and showcases the perceived advantages of non-Western alignments (Ehl, 2023; Raica et al., 2024).

Limitations of Russian Food Aid as Human Security

From a human security perspective, Russia's grain assistance falls short of key criteria for effective humanitarian action. First, it lacks universality, as aid is directed primarily toward politically aligned states rather than those facing the most acute need (Klomegah, 2024). Second, it is not prevention-oriented; assistance appears driven by short-term political considerations rather than efforts to address the structural causes of food insecurity. Third, it lacks multidimensionality. Human security frameworks emphasize interconnected threats across economic, environmental, health, and political domains (Dorn, 2001), yet Russian grain deliveries remain narrowly focused on immediate food supply, without addressing underlying drivers such as conflict, governance deficits, climate vulnerability, or weak agricultural systems (Kitenge, 2023; Sacko & Mayaki, 2023).

Concerns of sustainability further limit its effectiveness. The pledged 200,000 tons constitute episodic deliveries rather than sustained investment in resilient food systems (Kelly, 2024). In contrast, the now-terminated Black Sea Grain Initiative ensured continuous supply flows that stabilized global prices and supported longer-term food security (Nagurney, 2023; UNCTAD, 2022). Its replacement with limited bilateral shipments thus represents a net loss for global food security, even as it advances Russian geopolitical objectives.

African responses reflect awareness of these limitations. At the Russia–Africa Summit, several leaders emphasized the need for structural, long-term solutions over temporary relief (VOA Afrika, 2023), while African Union officials called for the restoration of the Black Sea Grain Initiative rather than reliance on bilateral aid (Churm, 2024). At the same time, responses remain differentiated. Some governments, such as Zimbabwe, appear to frame Russian assistance as political solidarity (Smith, 2023), whereas countries facing acute crises, including Somalia and Eritrea, may engage with it as immediate humanitarian relief despite its politicized character (Musvanhiri, 2024; Princewill, 2024). Overall, the pattern suggests that Russian grain aid operates more effectively as an instrument of foreign policy than as a consistent mechanism for advancing human security.

Discussions

Free grain to Africa: An instrumentalized foreign aid

Interpreted through Weiss's instrumentalization framework, Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and turn to bilateral, tied assistance marks a shift that heightens the likelihood that humanitarian action will be subordinated to foreign policy objectives. Rather than primarily addressing food insecurity in Africa, Russian grain aid is structured around political interests: the timing and distribution patterns suggest an effort to secure diplomatic support and deepen bilateral relationships with recipient states, rather than to respond systematically to the most acute humanitarian needs.

This case thus strongly exemplifies the instrumentalization of aid. Allocation patterns favor politically aligned or strategically significant partners, departing from principles of impartiality and needs-based distribution. As Langenkamp observes, decisions to provide assistance have become increasingly politicized, eroding core humanitarian norms such as neutrality and independence (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). Anderson similarly argues that aid is rarely neutral in practice, particularly in conflict settings, where its delivery inevitably carries political messages that may contradict formal commitments to neutrality and impartiality (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007).

Historical precedent reinforces this reading. During both the Cold War and the post-9/11 era, food aid often served strategic and domestic economic interests at the expense of recipient needs and long-term food security (Marchione & Messer, 2010). Subsequent scholarship links the politicization of aid to security anxieties, geopolitical competition, and fiscal pressures that sideline recipient agency (Essex, 2014). In this context, Russia's approach reflects a familiar logic of realpolitik, using aid to consolidate influence and reassert its status as an emerging donor (Brezhneva & Ukhova, 2013).

More broadly, donor behaviour has shifted toward prioritizing foreign policy objectives, with resources increasingly channelled through bilateral and targeted mechanisms rather than untied multilateral systems (Martin & Owen, 2014; Weiss, 2014). This trend enhances donor control while heightening the risk of politicization, as powerful states shape both allocation and implementation in line with strategic interests (Weiss, 2014). As Weiss concludes, the distinction between traditional and non-traditional donors is often overstated: in both cases, humanitarian assistance is frequently instrumentalized to influence other states.

Although Russia's delivery of 200,000 tons of grain to six African countries addresses immediate food needs, the design, timing, and distribution of this aid point more clearly to a strategy of influence projection and geopolitical positioning than to a sustained, people-centred commitment to human security.

Conclusion

This paper shows that Russia's food aid to Africa sits at the intersection of humanitarian need and geopolitical strategy. While framed as support for food security, the evidence suggests that political interests often take priority. Food aid becomes a tool of influence—used to build alliances, shape narratives, and expand Russia's presence—rather than a purely humanitarian response.

This case also exposes the limits of human security in practice. Russia's grain diplomacy falls short on key principles: it is selective rather than universal, focused on short-term supply instead of long-term systems, and lacks sustained commitment. More broadly, it highlights how humanitarian assistance is rarely neutral in international politics. At the same time, African states are not passive recipients. They actively navigate competing donors, balancing immediate gains with longer-term needs and using geopolitical competition to their advantage.

Limitation and Recommendations

This analysis underscores the importance for policymakers of minimizing political conditionality in the provision of humanitarian assistance to enhance human security outcomes. The contrast between Russia's politically targeted grain aid and the multilateral Black Sea Grain Initiative illustrates how institutional design shapes whether food aid functions primarily as a humanitarian instrument or a strategic tool. Future research should examine how international mechanisms can better insulate humanitarian assistance from political manipulation while sustaining donor commitment.

More broadly, the findings demonstrate that traditional security paradigms continue to shape humanitarian policy, despite rhetorical adherence to human security principles. As global food insecurity intensifies due to climate change, armed conflict, and economic instability, the tension between humanitarian imperatives and foreign policy interests is likely to deepen. The case of Russian grain aid to Africa provides a useful lens through which to assess both the constraints and potential of operationalizing people-centered security within an anarchic international system.

Several limitations point to avenues for further research. Long-term assessments of the impact of Russian grain aid on recipient countries' food security and political trajectories remain limited. Comparative analyses across donor states—specifically emerging donors from developing countries—would help determine whether the politicization observed in this case reflects a broader systemic pattern or a context-specific strategy. In addition, greater attention to African agency is necessary to move beyond donor-centric frameworks and develop a more comprehensive understanding of humanitarian assistance dynamics.

Ultimately, this case highlights the enduring challenge of translating human security from normative commitment into practical policy. While food aid retains the potential to advance humanitarian objectives, its effectiveness depends on institutional design, donor intent, and implementation practices that prioritize people-centered outcomes over strategic considerations. This tension will likely remain a defining feature of humanitarian assistance in an increasingly multipolar international order.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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