

# Influences of Potential Military Conflict between Taiwan and China on the Intention to Emigrate among Taiwanese Individuals

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Amid escalating tensions between Taiwan and China, the potential for military conflict profoundly affects the intention to emigrate among Taiwanese citizens. This study examined the influence of the perception of potential military conflict between Taiwan and China, depressive symptoms, and sociodemographic characteristics on emigration intention among Taiwanese citizens. **Methods:** Through stratified random sampling and telephone interviews conducted, data on emigration intentions, awareness of China's military activities, concern of potential military conflict, the perceived effects of military conflict on the lifestyle, and depressive symptoms of 2,000 Taiwanese individuals were collected. Logistic regression models were used to analyze the associations between emigration intention and various predictors, namely, attitudes toward military conflict, depressive symptoms, and sociodemographic characteristics. **Results:** The findings revealed that 23.4% of participants harbored the intention to emigrate. Significant determinants of this intention were high education level ( $p < 0.001$ ), concern about the possibility of military conflict ( $p < 0.001$ ), concern about the effects of military conflict ( $p < 0.001$ ), a marked lack of confidence in the ability of political leadership to manage cross-strait relations ( $p < 0.001$ ), and significant depressive symptoms ( $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, older age ( $p < 0.001$ ), lack of awareness about China's military activities ( $p < 0.001$ ), and chronic physical ailments ( $p < 0.05$ ) were inversely related to emigration intention. Age and education level moderated the relationship between military conflict-related concern and emigration intention ( $p < 0.05$ ). **Conclusion:** The interplay of age, educational level, concern about military conflict between Taiwan and China, significant depressive symptoms, and confidence in political leadership significantly influences emigration intention among Taiwanese individuals, highlighting the need for targeted policy responses.

**Key words:** depressive symptoms, emigration intention, insecurity, Taiwan–China relationship  
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## Introduction

The escalating military activities by China toward Taiwan have not only heightened regional tensions but also significantly affected the psychological well-being of the Taiwanese population. The Taiwanese Defense Ministry's daily updates on Chinese military aircraft and naval vessel movements since 2020 have played a pivotal rôle in shaping public perception and anxiety levels regarding the impending

threat of military conflict [1]. Strategies for coping with the threat of war are usually developed through three processes proposed by Lazarus and Folkman [2]. These processes are perceiving a threat to oneself (primary appraisal), determining a potential response to the threat (secondary appraisal), and

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executing the response (coping). Emigration is a strategy for coping with the threat of war [3]. Unlike fleeing during wartime, emigration is a result of self-determination and planning. Evading the potential military conflict between Taiwan and China is a common reason for emigration from Taiwan, especially among individuals with high economic capacity [4]. Further research is required to determine whether the increasing military activities by China near Taiwan in recent years have increased the intention to emigrate among Taiwanese individuals.

The tendency of Taiwanese citizens to consider relocation as a coping mechanism in response to political and military crises is not unique to Taiwan but is observable worldwide. For example, when Donald Trump won 7 out of 11 republican primaries in the US presidential election in 2016 and when the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union, Google searches for “immigration to Canada” significantly increased in both the United States and in the United Kingdom. But notably, online searches for “immigration” do not necessarily indicate that people are taking immediate action to immigrate. Instead, these searches reflect the attitudes of certain segments of the population who perceive a sense of vulnerability in the face of military threats. From verbalizing the idea of immigration, searching for relevant information, and drawing up plans, for actual implementation, these represent different levels of motivation.

Our previous study found an increase in internet searches for “immigration” and “depression” in Taiwan coincided with and followed Chinese military activities; this finding highlights the acute psychological effects of such threats [1]. This response aligns with Carver et al.’s coping strategies framework [5]; according to this framework, information seeking, such as researching immigration options, represents a problem-focused coping strategy, which potentially results in more favorable mental health outcomes. Conversely, the delayed increase in searches for “depression” indicates less effective coping mechanisms, which are characterized by emotional venting in the aftermath of military provocations. Moreover, the association between the perceived threat of military conflicts and mental health issues further complicates the decision-making process regarding emigration. Despite the aforementioned longitudinal research, further investigation into the factors related to emigration in response to Chinese military threats is required.

In this study, we intended to study the effects of concerns about potential military conflict between Taiwan and China and depression on emigration intention in Taiwanese individuals. We also investigated the effects of sociodemographic characteristics on the associations of the aforementioned concerns with emigration intentions. We hypothesized that Taiwanese individuals who are aware of China’s military activities would perceive a greater possibility of military conflict between Taiwan and China, expect greater lifestyle effects to result from military conflict, report lower confidence in coping with such conflict, and have lower confidence in the ability of Taiwanese politicians to effectively manage

Taiwan–China relations are more likely to have an intention to emigrate. We further hypothesized that depression would be significantly associated with an increased intention to emigrate, with gender, age, and education level potentially moderating this association.

## Methods

### *Participants and procedures*

In this study, telephone interviews were done with Taiwanese citizens aged 20 years or older between November 8 and 20, 2023. According to Hung [6], a sample of at least 2,000 individuals is required to ensure a representative survey of public opinions in Taiwan. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, this study used data from the Ministry of the Interior on the distribution of Taiwanese individuals by gender, age, and number in each of Taiwan’s 22 administrative districts.

Individuals were divided into landline and cellphone-only groups. The Ministry of Digital Affairs estimated that in 2023, 72% of Taiwanese individuals could be called through a landline, and 28% could be called only through their cell phones [7]. Accordingly, in this study, the numbers of respondents were included in these proportions based on the type of phone they used. Landline users were first grouped according to their location in Taiwan’s 22 administrative districts; subsequently, simple random sampling was used to select landline users from each district. Cellphone-only users were randomly identified based on the mobile network subscriber information obtained from the National Communications Commission (NCC). Individuals who also had landlines were excluded based on the records provided by the NCC. If the selected call was not answered or the person answering the call refused to participate in this study, a substitute call was selected from the list. The calls continued until the predetermined number of participants had been completed.

A computer-assisted telephone interviewing system was used to do the interviews. Each interviewer was trained to conduct interviews in both Chinese and Taiwanese Hokkien. Each interview began with an explanation of the purpose of the study and a statement that participation was voluntary, and potential participants were informed of the time required for the interviews. The interview was done after determining that the individual on the phone was eligible for participation according to the inclusion criteria. The interviewer first asked the participant whether it was better to do the interview in Chinese or Taiwanese Hokkien and chose the language to be used based on the participant’s answer. This study included a total of 2,000 Taiwanese individuals, comprising 1,468 (73.4%) landline users and 532 (26.6%) cellphone-only users. Another 965 individuals refused to be interviewed (70.2% were landline users, and 29.8% were cellphone-only users). The complete rate was 67.45%. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the institutional review board of Kaohsiung Medical University Hospital (IRB protocol number =

KMUHIRB-E(II)-20230122 and date of approval = May 19, 2023). Because the survey responses were anonymous, the institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent.

## Measures

### Intention to emigrate

In this study, participants were asked the following question: “Would you like to emigrate to a country other than China if you have the opportunity in the future?” For this question, participants responded “no” or “yes.”

### Potential military conflicts between Taiwan and China

The present study evaluated the participants’ awareness of China’s military activities, concern about potential military conflict between Taiwan and China, and confidence in coping with the effect of military conflict by asking the following six questions: (a) “As far as you know, did more Chinese aircraft cross the center of the Taiwan Strait in 2022 than in 2021?” This question had three response options: “no change,” “fewer in 2022,” or “more in 2022.” Participants who answered “no change” or “fewer in 2022” were categorized as being unaware of China’s military activities, whereas those who answered “more in 2022” were categorized as being aware of China’s military activities; (b) “What do you think is the likelihood of a war between Taiwan and China in 5 years?” This question was rated on a 5-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (definite); (c) “How worried are you about a possible war between Taiwan and China?” This question was rated on a 5-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely); (d) “If a war breaks out between Taiwan and China, how much do you think it will affect the lives of people in Taiwan?” This question was rated on a 5-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely); (e) “If a war breaks out between Taiwan and China, how sure are you that you will be able to cope with the effects of the war on your life?” This question was rated on a 5-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (very sure) to 5 (not at all); and (f) “How confident are you in the ability of political figures to effectively manage Taiwan–China relations?” This question was rated on a 5-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (very high) to 5 (very low).

### Depressive symptoms

We used the seven-item depression subscale of the Chinese version of the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) to measure depressive symptoms in the month before the interview [8,9]. Each item was rated on a 4-point scale with endpoints ranging from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time). The validity and reliability of the Chinese version of the DASS-21 have been demonstrated [8,10]. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of the depression subscale was 0.83. To calculate the score, the scores of the items are summed and then multiplied by 2 (ranging from 0 to 42); a total score of  $\geq 10$  represents significant depressive symptoms [9,11,12].

## Sociodemographic characteristics and health conditions

We collected data on the participants’ gender, age, education level (senior high school or below vs. college or above), and depressive symptoms. We also determined the presence of mental and physical conditions among participants by asking two questions: “Do you have a history of mental problems such as depression, anxiety, alcohol addiction, or insomnia?” and “Do you have a major physical problem requiring ongoing treatment?” Participants responded “no” or “yes” to these questions.

### Statistical analysis

Sociodemographic characteristics, mental and physical conditions, intention to emigrate, and awareness of and attitudes toward potential military conflict between Taiwan and China were summarized and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The distributions of continuous variables were tested for skewness and kurtosis to determine their levels of departure from a normal distribution. The absolute values of skewness and kurtosis were  $< 1$ , indicating no major deviation. Bivariable logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine the associations of independents (i.e., awareness of and attitudes toward potential military conflict between Taiwan and China, sociodemographic characteristics, significant depressive symptoms, and health conditions) with the intention to emigrate. The factors that were significantly associated with the intention to emigrate were included in a multivariable logistic regression analysis model. Following the method of Baron and Kenny [13], we examined the moderating effects of sociodemographic characteristics on the aforementioned associations. The results of analyses are presented as odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

The differences between the groups were significant if  $p$ -values were smaller than 0.05. Statistical analyses were done using the International Business Machines Statistical Package on Social Science software version 24.0 (IBM SPSS Inc., Armonk, New York, USA).

## Results

Table 1 presents the participants’ sociodemographic characteristics, mental and physical conditions, intention to emigrate, and awareness of and attitudes toward potential military conflict between Taiwan and China. The study population ( $n = 2,000$ ) comprised 974 (48.7%) women and 1,026 (51.3%) men, with a mean age of 52.0 years (standard deviation [SD] = 16.2 years), 53.0% of the participants had a college degree or higher, and 8.9% and 10.9% had mental and physical conditions, respectively. Moreover, 15.0% had significant depressive symptoms. In the study population, 23.4% reported an intention to emigrate; 23.9% were unaware of China’s military activities; and the mean scores for the  $s$  regarding potential military conflict between Taiwan and China ranged between 2 and 4.

Table 2 presents the results of bivariable logistic regression of the factors associated with the intention to emigrate. An

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics ( $N = 2,000$ )

	Mean $\pm$ SD
Gender, $n$ (%)	
Women	974 (48.7)
Men	1,026 (51.3)
Age (years)	52.0 $\pm$ 16.2
Education, $n$ (%)	
Senior high school or below	940 (47.0)
College or above	1,060 (53.0)
Having a mental condition, $n$ (%)	
No	1,822 (91.1)
Yes	178 (8.9)
Having a chronic physical condition, $n$ (%)	
No	1,782 (89.1)
Yes	218 (10.9)
Intention to emigrate, $n$ (%)	
No	1,532 (76.6)
Yes	468 (23.4)
Being unaware of China's military activities, $n$ (%)	
No	1,520 (76.0)
Yes	480 (24.0)
Likelihood of military conflict between Taiwan and China	2.4 $\pm$ 1.0
Concern about possible military conflict	2.2 $\pm$ 1.1
Effects of war on lifestyle	3.8 $\pm$ 1.1
Lack of self-confidence in coping with the effects of war	3.8 $\pm$ 1.1
Lack of confidence in the ability of politicians to manage the Taiwan–China relations	3.2 $\pm$ 1.0
Significant depressive symptoms identified by the DASS-21, $n$ (%)	
No	1,700 (85.0)
Yes	300 (15.0)

DASS-21, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale; SD, standard deviation

**Table 2.** Bivariate logistic regression analysis of associations of factors with intention to emigrate

	OR (95% CI)
Gender <sup>a</sup>	1.070 (0.878-1.304)
Age	0.957 (0.951-0.964)***
Education <sup>b</sup>	3.971 (3.150-5.005)***
Being unaware of China's military activities <sup>c</sup>	0.591 (0.459-0.760)***
Likelihood of military conflict between Taiwan and China	1.219 (1.102-1.349)***
Concern about possible military conflict	1.306 (1.194-1.429)***
Effects of war on lifestyle	1.481 (1.341-1.635)***
Lack of self-confidence in coping with the effects of war	1.176 (1.073-1.289)**
Lack of confidence in the ability of politicians	1.513 (1.360-1.684)***
Having a mental condition <sup>d</sup>	1.036 (0.734-1.464)
Having a chronic physical condition <sup>e</sup>	0.636 (0.447-0.903)*
Significant depressive symptoms identified by the DASS-21	1.809 (1.400-2.337)***

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ <sup>a</sup>Women as the reference; <sup>b</sup>Senior high school or below as the reference; <sup>c</sup>Awareness as the reference; <sup>d</sup>No mental condition as the reference; <sup>e</sup>No physical condition as the reference

DASS-21, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval

education level of college or above ( $p < 0.001$ ), perceived high likelihood of military conflict between Taiwan and China ( $p < 0.001$ ), high levels of concern about possible military conflict ( $p < 0.001$ ), perceived great effect of military conflict on lifestyles ( $p < 0.001$ ), low self-confidence in coping with the effects of military conflict ( $p = 0.001$ ), low confidence in the ability of politicians to manage Taiwan–China relations ( $p < 0.001$ ), and having significant depressive symptoms ( $p < 0.001$ ) were significantly associated with the intention to emigrate, whereas older age ( $p < 0.001$ ), being unaware of China's military activities ( $p < 0.001$ ), and having a chronic physical condition ( $p = 0.01$ ) were significantly associated with no intention to emigrate.

Table 3 presents the results of multivariable logistic regression of the factors associated with the intention to emigrate. Model I revealed that an education level of college or higher ( $p < 0.001$ ), high levels of concern about possible military conflict ( $p < 0.001$ ), perceived great effect of military conflict on lifestyles ( $p < 0.001$ ), low confidence in the ability of politicians to manage Taiwan–China relations ( $p < 0.001$ ), and having significant depressive symptoms ( $p < 0.001$ ) were significantly associated with the intention to emigrate, whereas older age ( $p < 0.001$ ) was significantly associated with no intention to emigrate. Model II included and examined the interactions of age and education level with the participants' concern about possible military conflict, perceived great effects of military conflict, confidence in the ability of politicians, and significant depressive symptoms. The results revealed that the interactions of age and education level with concern about possible military conflict were significantly associated with the intention to emigrate ( $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.05$ , respectively). The associations between concern about military conflict and the intention to emigrate increased as age ( $p < 0.001$ ) and education level ( $p < 0.001$ ) increased.

## Discussion

In our comprehensive examination of the factors influencing Taiwanese individuals' intention to emigrate, we discovered a nuanced interplay between concern about geopolitical tensions, personal decision-making processes, and mental health considerations. Our study is distinct in terms of the in-depth analysis of how potential military conflict between Taiwan and China, sociodemographic characteristics, and depressive symptoms, influence emigration intentions. Notably, 23.4% of the participants expressed an intention to emigrate (Table 1), which was primarily motivated by high levels of education, high levels of concern about the likelihood and consequences of military conflict, a significant lack of confidence in the ability of political leadership to effectively manage cross-strait tensions, and the presence of significant depressive symptoms (Table 2). A unique contribution of our study is the identification of the moderating effects of age and the education level on the relationship between military conflict-related concern, significant depressive symptoms, and the intention to emigrate (Table 3). These findings highlight the complex influence of geopolitical tensions and mental health issues on



**Table 3.** Multivariable logistic regression analysis of associations of factors with intention to emigrate

	Model I, OR (95% CI)	Model II, OR (95% CI)
Age	0.966 (0.958–0.973)***	0.953 (0.913–0.995)*
Education level <sup>a</sup>	2.280 (1.748–2.973)***	7.752 (1.933–31.096)**
Unawareness of China's military activities <sup>b</sup>	0.926 (0.697–1.231)	0.929 (0.695–1.243)
Likelihood of military conflict between Taiwan and China	0.979 (0.854–1.122)	0.980 (0.854–1.125)
Concern about a possible military conflict	1.235 (1.083–1.410)**	0.691 (0.430–1.109)
Effects of military conflict on lifestyle	1.262 (1.116–1.427)***	1.399 (0.857–2.284)
Lack of self-confidence in coping with the effects of military conflict	0.950 (0.845–1.069)	0.945 (0.839–1.064)
Lack of confidence in the ability of politicians	1.418 (1.257–1.600)***	2.128 (1.238–3.659)**
Having a chronic physical condition <sup>c</sup>	1.006 (0.680–1.490)	1.009 (0.679–1.499)
Significant depressive symptoms identified by the DASS-21	1.676 (1.256–2.236)***	0.903 (0.296–2.761)
Age × concern about possible military conflict		1.008 (1.000–1.016)*
Age × effects of military conflict on people's lives		1.002 (0.993–1.010)
Age × lack of confidence in the ability of politicians		0.995 (0.986–1.004)
Age × significant depressive symptoms identified by the DASS-21		1.019 (1.000–1.038)
Education × concern about possible military conflict		1.353 (1.049–1.746)*
Education × effects of military conflict on lifestyle		0.776 (0.589–1.023)
Education × lack of confidence in the ability of politicians		0.778 (0.579–1.045)
Education × significant depressive symptoms identified by the DASS-21		0.723 (0.381–1.372)

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

<sup>a</sup>Senior high school or below as the reference; <sup>b</sup>Awareness as the reference; <sup>c</sup>No physical condition as the reference  
DASS-21, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval

personal life choices, demonstrating that the effects of potential military conflict on psychological well-being extending beyond immediate security concerns. The effects of geopolitical tensions permeate deeper into the social fabric, influencing individual life trajectories in profound ways. The results of this study gave a detailed exploration of these dynamics and offered valuable insights into the complex forces at play in regions marked by political instability and the potential for military conflict. Thus, we suggest that the study results can contribute a novel perspective to the discourse on emigration, mental health, and geopolitical tensions.

Being consistent with the findings of previous studies, our study findings revealed a strong correlation between China's military activities, a surge in emigration-related online searches, and an increase in searches related to depression among Taiwanese citizens, reflecting their instinctive reaction to imminent threats and the psychological effects of these threats [1]. This phenomenon is similar to historical instances, in which emigration emerged as a predominant coping mechanism in response to escalating tensions between Taiwan and China. According to the study results, mental health considerations add a new dimension to the coping strategies used by individuals. Notable periods of increased emigration activity coincide with significant political events, and such coping strategies are further complicated by the mental health implications of geopolitical tensions. We found that 300 out of 2,000 (15.0%) of study participants in this study reported to have significant depressive symptoms in the questionnaire results, but only 178 out of 2,000 (8.9%) self-reported past mental health problems (Table 1). It is possible that some of the participants were not aware of their own depression, thus contributing to the discrepancy between

the significance of “have a mental condition” and “significant depressive symptoms.” Further research is needed to clarify this discrepancy.

The present study results (Tables 2 and 3) showed that significant associations existed between concern about military conflict and the intention to emigrate increased as age ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the education level increased ( $p < 0.001$ ). Such findings imply a complex interplay of personal attributes in the coping process, diverging from a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding individual responses to geopolitical tensions. Higher education levels may equip individuals with broader perspectives and more resources, facilitating more informed decision-making processes in the face of threats. Moreover, age-related factors might influence the perceptions of vulnerability or resilience, further influencing the decision to seek safety through emigration. Those who are more educated and older may have sufficient financial resources and time to prepare for emigration and thus have a stronger intention to emigrate in response to perceived military threats.

Our findings, especially those related to the role of depressive symptoms in coping strategies, can be interpreted from the valuable perspective of the coping strategies delineated by Carver et al. [5], who classified responses into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and noneffective coping. The act of seeking information on emigration is indicative of problem-focused coping and suggests a proactive approach to managing stressors by altering the situation. This approach contrasts with noneffective coping mechanisms, which are often associated with adverse mental health effects. Although potentially alleviating the immediate stress induced by military threats, the decision to emigrate introduces new challenges including adaptation to a foreign environment, posing

additional mental health risks, as highlighted by meta-analyses by Amiri [14], Bourque et al. [15], and Foo et al. [16]; these meta-analyses have documented increased risks of mental disorders among migrants.

Our study results not only corroborate the literature on the effects of geopolitical tensions on migration patterns but also advance the discourse by uncovering the moderating effects of individual characteristics on the relationship between geopolitical tensions and the intention to emigrate. This study provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between external threats and personal coping mechanisms, thus offering a more comprehensive view of migration dynamics in regions marked by political instability and conflict and indicating the importance of addressing mental health issues for populations affected by geopolitical tensions through policy and support frameworks.

### Study limitations

Four methodological limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting our findings.

- The timing of this study, which preceded Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections on January 13, 2024, may have introduced bias into the analysis. The fervent electoral campaigns during this period may have influenced respondents' expressions of emigration intentions, potentially skewing the data
- Telephone interviews may not capture the full spectrum of opinions, particularly among the younger demographic, who are more inclined toward mobile communication and are less likely to use landlines
- The cross-sectional design of this study limits the ability to infer causal relationships between the factors, such as the direct effects of military tensions on emigration intentions
- Although we trained the interviewers to be able to do interviews in both Chinese and Taiwanese Hokkien, participants might be accustomed to using other languages such as Hakka or aboriginal languages. Although the majority of the Taiwanese population can understand Chinese, whether the type of language affects the participants' understanding of the interviews needs to be further investigated.

### Summary

This study highlights the complex interplay between geopolitical tensions, sociodemographic characteristics, significant depressive symptoms, and Taiwanese individuals' intention to emigrate. The findings suggest that high education levels, concerns about potential military conflict, a significant lack of confidence in political leadership, and the presence of significant depressive symptoms significantly influenced the intention to emigrate. The timing of the study, which preceded significant electoral events, may have affected responses; further research in less politically charged contexts is required to validate these findings. In addition, the notable association between significant depressive symptoms and the intention to emigrate indicates that mental health is a critical component for understanding migration dynamics in the context of geopolitical instability. Future research should explore the mechanisms by which depression interacts with geopolitical

and sociodemographic characteristics to influence emigration intentions, potentially informing interventions aimed at mitigating the psychological effects of such tensions.

### Data Availability Statement

The data are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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None.

### Conflicts of Interest

C. F. Yen is a domestic advisory board member of the *Taiwanese Journal of Psychiatry* (Taipei). He did not participate in peer review of this manuscript or made any decision in accepting this manuscript to publish. All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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