

The Geopolitics of Karuṇā: Can Compassion Be a Strategy?

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Abstract—The global order today is shaped by fear, coercion, and competitive nationalism. Yet an alternative exists—rooted in Indic civilizational wisdom—where power is not defined by domination but by the ability to protect, uplift, and harmonize. This article introduces Karuṇā (compassion) as a legitimate category of statecraft. It argues that compassion is not sentimentality, but a form of moral strength rooted in self-mastery, empathy, and responsibility. Drawing from Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and contemporary diplomatic practices, the paper suggests that compassion has measurable geopolitical value: it builds trust, stabilizes alliances, prevents conflict escalation, and projects moral leadership. The study concludes by outlining a framework for Compassionate Realism—a mode of engagement through which India can reshape global politics not by force, but by the radiance of ethical power.

Index Terms—Karuṇā, Dharmic Realism, Indian Foreign Policy, Civilizational Diplomacy, Soft Power, Moral Leadership, Global Order

I. INTRODUCTION: THE FORGOTTEN POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Power, in the traditional imagination of world politics, has meant the ability to compel: to conquer territory, extract resources, control narratives. The lexicon of statecraft—security, deterrence, strategic depth—has been built on the assumption that influence arises from force. But what if the most enduring form of power does not arise from fear, but from trust?

Civilizational India always understood power differently. Rather than asking, “How do we win over others?” the question was, “How do we live in a way that others wish to walk with us?” This is not moral idealism—it is strategic intelligence.

Karuṇā is not softness.

Karuṇā is the courage to see oneself in another, and to act on that recognition. It requires:

- Inner steadiness
- Moral self-control
- Clarity of purpose
- Strength without hostility

When a nation acts from Karuṇā, it does not behave as a victim—it acts as a guardian.

India's vaccine diplomacy, peacekeeping record, humanitarian food corridors, and conflict-mediating posture all reveal something fundamental: India projects influence differently. It does not conquer to rule; it connects to uplift.

This is not a new policy. It is ancient grammar resurfacing in modern form.

To reintroduce Karuṇā into global strategy is not to propose sentiment over strategy, but to argue that the next age of power will not be led by those who can frighten, but by those who can reassure.

The world is tired of empires.

It is ready for civilizational leadership.

Karuṇā may be the principle that turns India from a voice in the world into a moral centre of the world.

The Meaning of Karuṇā: More Than Compassion

Karuṇā is often flattened into the English word compassion, but the Indic idea is far deeper. In Sanskrit and Pali traditions, Karuṇā is a force, not a feeling. It is the recognition that all beings are interlinked, and therefore the suffering of one is never isolated. It is relational power.

Where Western strategic literature divides ethics and interest, Indic thought fuses them:

Dharma is both moral law and practical order.

Karuṇā is one of Dharma's expressions in public life.

To practice Karuṇā, a person—or a nation—must possess:

- Inner stability (Śama)
- Clarity of discernment (Viveka)
- A sense of responsibility (Kārya-bodha)

- Strength without hostility (Abhaya-śakti)

Karuṇā therefore presupposes strength.

Only the strong can afford generosity.

Only the balanced can offer peace.

In India's civilizational worldview:

- Compassion is not weakness.
- Compassion is sovereignty.

It reflects the capacity to remain unshaken by provocation and untempted by domination—to hold power without needing to perform power.

This is why Karuṇā becomes a strategic asset:

- It builds trust faster than coercion.
- It reduces the cost of maintaining influence.
- It attracts cooperation voluntarily.

Empires are expensive.

Respect is efficient.

Karuṇā, therefore, is not sentimental policy—it is sustainable power.

The Failure of Fear-Based Power

20th-century geopolitics was built on deterrence—if nations feared one another enough, they would avoid war. This remained the foundation of:

- Nuclear doctrine
- Military alliances
- Balance-of-power realism

But the deterrence paradigm is now unstable:

- Technology accelerates escalation.
- Information warfare multiplies misunderstanding.
- Non-state actors complicate retaliation.
- Economic interdependence blurs enemies and partners.

Fear no longer prevents war; in many cases, it provokes it.

Meanwhile, mistrust corrodes:

- trade routes
- supply chains
- development partnerships
- climate cooperation

The world is discovering that cooperation cannot be forced.

It must be earned.

This is where Karuṇā enters—not as morality, but as architecture.

Karuṇā builds the invisible infrastructure of world order:

- Reliability
- Predictability
- Mutual respect

- Shared responsibility

It is these qualities—not weapons—that sustain peace.

II. DHARMIC REALISM: THE INDIAN PARADIGM OF POWER

India's strategic tradition never denied power.

It only insisted that power must be anchored.

From the Mahābhārata to Kautilya's Arthaśāstra, the message is clear:

Power without Dharma collapses.

Power with Dharma endures.

Dharma is not moral sermon; it is alignment with reality:

- Recognizing interdependence.
- Acknowledging limits of force.
- Maintaining internal balance.
- Exercising restraint without passivity.

This creates a strategic position that is neither:

- Idealistic pacifism, nor
- Aggressive realism

It is something rarer:

Compassionate Realism

Strength guided by conscience.

Interest pursued without arrogance.

Security maintained without humiliation of others.

This is what makes India's foreign policy stable, especially compared to expansionist models.

The world is beginning to notice.

India's Diplomatic Architecture of Karuṇā

India's foreign policy often appears understated when compared to the theatricality of great-power politics. But this subtlety is not absence — it is presence without aggression.

India does not impose itself; it offers itself.

This diplomatic posture emerges from a civilizational habit:

Power is not validated by conquest, but by the ability to protect.

This is why, across regions, India's presence tends to stabilize rather than disturb:

- It builds corridors, not walls
- It negotiates ceasefires, not escalations
- It seeks balance, not dominance

This does not mean India avoids strength.

It means India exercises strength without spectacle.

The world often misunderstands quiet power.

But quiet power endures.

Karuṇā, when translated into diplomacy, becomes:

- Predictability in crisis
- Reliability in partnership
- Humanity in response

A state that acts with Karuṇā is not merely respected.

It is trusted.

And trust is the most strategic currency in the 21st century.

III. VACCINE MAITRI: COMPASSION AS STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

When the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to its knees, nations retreated behind borders, hoarded vaccines, and prioritized survival over solidarity.

India did something different.

Through Vaccine Maitri, India supplied vaccines and medical support to 150+ nations, including small island states, African partners, neighbouring countries, and even powers far beyond its immediate geopolitical sphere.

To the casual observer, this appeared as humanitarian outreach.

But strategically, it was civilizational diplomacy in action.

India communicated three messages:

1. We do not abandon the world in times of fear.
2. Our compassion does not depend on alignment or advantage.
3. Leadership is the courage to give when others hold back.

Vaccine Maitri was not charity.

It was sovereignty expressed as care.

It signaled that India does not lead by coercion —

India leads by presence, responsibility, and steadiness in crisis.

In global diplomacy, gestures shape memory.

And memory shapes alliances.

This is the geopolitics of Karuṇā.

Sri Lanka: Stabilizing Without Dominating

When Sri Lanka faced economic collapse in 2022, its society fractured under scarcity — fuel lines, power outages, and food shortages.

Major powers watched.

Regional actors calculated leverage.

India acted.

Not with conditionality, not with strategic humiliation, but with support designed to preserve dignity.

- Food shipments
- Fuel supplies
- Credit lines
- Currency support

Without demanding allegiance.

Without redrawing influence maps.

This is crucial:

India helped without making Sri Lanka indebted in identity.

Where empire extracts, Karuṇā restores.

Where power often humiliates, Karuṇā uplifts.

Sri Lanka's stability was not treated as a bargaining chip —

It was treated as a regional responsibility.

Because a neighbour's suffering is never isolated.

Security is not a fortress — it is a shared ecosystem.

This is strategic compassion —
crafted by wisdom, not sentiment.

IV. PEACEKEEPING: THE SWORD THAT PROTECTS, NOT CONQUERS

India is one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations in history.

Yet, India has never used peacekeeping as imperial theatre.

Its soldiers do not march to occupy.

They stand to protect.

This is unusual.

Most military footprints across the world signify:

- Influence
- Dominance
- Leverage

India's military presence abroad signifies:

- Trust
- Security
- Moral authority

To protect without possessing is the highest form of strength.

In the Indian worldview:

The sword is not dishonourable —

Misuse of the sword is.

Power is sacred only when used to prevent violence from escalating.

This is Karuṇā with steel at its core.

Compassionate Realism: Strength Without Performance

The common misconception is that compassion is an emotional surplus belonging to saints and poets, irrelevant to power.

This is because modernity has confused aggression with strength and restraint with weakness.

But true strength is measured by:

- What one does not need to prove
- What one can hold without fear
- What one can give without depletion

A nation rooted in Karuṇā does not posture.

It does not broadcast victory.

It does not seek applause.

Its confidence is inward.

This is Civilizational Realism:

- Power grounded in character.
- Diplomacy grounded in dignity.
- Leadership grounded in responsibility.

Empires fear decline.

Civilizations do not.

Why the World is Ready for Karuṇā

The world is changing.

And with it, the psychology of power is changing.

Humanity is exhausted by:

- Endless wars that resolve nothing
- Economies that produce inequality faster than wealth
- Technologies that amplify anxiety more than well-being
- Nationalisms that fracture more than they unite

People are searching — not for new empires — but for new meaning.

And meaning is not built through might.

Meaning is built through care, responsibility, wisdom, dignity, presence, equanimity, humility, clarity, courage.

India is the only major civilization with a historical vocabulary for this.

We have not learned Karuṇā yesterday.

We have practiced it for five thousand years.

The world does not need India to imitate power.

The world needs India to remember its power.

Karuṇā as Strategic Patience

Modern international relations privileges speed: rapid deployments, instant retaliations, immediate statements, and visible posture.

But civilizational diplomacy operates on a different clock.

India's strategic culture draws from an older temporal rhythm — one that recognizes that power is not merely force, but also timing.

Strategic patience is not inaction.

It is:

- Decision without agitation
- Response without impulse
- Firmness without spectacle

This is why India is able to wait without appearing weak and act without appearing reckless.

For example:

- During border standoffs, India does not resort to rhetoric; it holds the line.
- During multilateral negotiations, India does not rush to align; it studies the arc of consequences.
- During regional conflicts, India does not exploit instability; it calculates the stability of futures.

This is Karuṇā as statecraft:

Compassion does not mean softness.

Compassion means clarity — about what must be protected, and when.

Where Realpolitik often behaves out of insecurity, Karuṇā-based diplomacy acts from centeredness.

The one who knows who they are does not need to perform power.

They simply are powerful.

The Vishwa-Network Model of Influence

Western diplomacy has historically expanded through territorial control and resource extraction — empire as enforcement.

In contrast, India's global expansion has always been cultural, intellectual, spiritual, technological, and relational:

- Buddhism traveled without armies.
- Ayurveda traveled without conquest.
- Yoga traveled without coercion.
- Sanskrit vocabulary entered Southeast Asian polities through shared imagination, not force.

This is what we may call the Vishwa-Network model

— a network of relationships instead of hierarchies of dominance.

In today's geopolitical architecture, this takes new forms:

Old Empire Model	Vishwa-Network Model
Territory	Trust
Dependency	Partnership
Extraction	Co-development
Military Presence	Cultural Conviction
Enforcement	Invitation

This is influence without possession.
It is not India's rise against others —
It is India's rise with others.
Such power is sticky — because it binds not through fear, but through meaning.
This is why Indian soft power is not entertainment;
It is civilizational memory reactivated.
The world does not merely watch India.
The world recognizes India.

Public Service as Foreign Policy

There is a moral elegance in the idea that:
Domestic righteousness becomes foreign strength.
India's public service ecosystem — from ISRO to NDRF to AIIMS medical diplomacy to digital public infrastructure — is not just inward-facing.
It is globally demonstrative.
When India:

- Sends disaster relief to Turkey
- Builds parliament complexes in Africa
- Digitizes payments systems in Bhutan
- Shares open-source vaccine technology with the Global South

It exports not products, but models of governance.
And models are more influential than missiles.
Models convince without force.
Models travel without propaganda.
Models endure without policing.
This is Karuṇā institutionalized.
The state that serves its own people with dignity naturally serves the world with dignity.
Foreign policy is not something India puts on for the world.
It is something India is.

The Spiritual Foundation of Statecraft

The idea that spirituality weakens political realism is a misreading — largely inherited from European nation-state formation, where religion and power historically clashed.

Indian statecraft emerged differently.

In India:

- Spirituality was not withdrawal, it was clarity of mind.
- Renunciation was not escape, it was freedom from fear.
- Dharma was not dogma, it was the architecture of responsibility.

This is why leaders like Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi, and Ambedkar could speak of politics in the language of moral courage, not power performance.

The spiritual foundation of Indian statecraft has always been:

Strength is sacred only when it protects the weak.

This principle is neither sentimental nor utopian.

It is geopolitical wisdom.

A nation rooted in spiritual clarity cannot be intimidated.

It also cannot be provoked.

Karuṇā is not softness.

Karuṇā is inner sovereignty.

Toward a Multipolarity of Dignity

The 21st century is not merely multipolar — it is multi-civilizational.

Global leadership today will not be determined by:

- GDP rankings alone,
- nor military alliances alone,
- nor technological advancement alone.

It will be determined by the moral grammar of coexistence a civilization offers the world.

India's contribution to the emerging global order is not simply strategic autonomy.

It is an ethics of coexistence.

A worldview in which:

- No nation must shrink for another to grow.
- No culture must disappear for another to flourish.
- No identity must be erased to participate in humanity.

This is multipolarity with dignity, not multipolarity with suspicion.

India is uniquely positioned to shape this future — because we have lived this future in the past.

The Ethics of Presence: Power Without Anxiety

Most nations demonstrate power through performance — statements, sanctions, military posturing, public spectacle.

But India's diplomatic behaviour has long been shaped by an ethics of presence, not noise.

Presence means:

- Being centered, not defensive
- Responding from clarity, not insecurity
- Letting strategic depth speak louder than strategic display

This is why India rarely negotiates from panic or pressure.

It is difficult to intimidate a civilization that has seen thousands of empires rise and fall.

The Indian tradition calls this *sthita-prajñā* — a mind steady in action.

Where aggression is a reaction, presence is a stance.

Presence means:

Reactive Power	Civilizational Presence
Needs to prove itself	Does not require validation
Acts to display	Acts from understanding
Fear-based	Confidence-based
Short-term	Deep time horizon

A nation rooted in presence cannot be drawn into someone else's urgency.

It chooses when, how, and why it acts.

This is *karuṇā*, not as sentiment, but as composure in power.

Cultural Memory as Strategic Capacity

The dominant Western model of IR imagines nations as only political entities.

India is not merely a political unit — it is a continuity of memory.

Civilizations differ from states because:

- They remember longer,
- They negotiate slower,
- They absorb more,
- They collapse less easily.

India's memory of plural coexistence — Buddhist, Jain, Bhakti, Sufi, Sikh, Advaita, Shakta, Islamic, Christian, Indigenous — has given it a stable emotional temperament in diplomacy.

Nations with short historical memory overreact.

Civilizations with deep cultural memory respond proportionately.

This is why India:

- Do not panic under pressure.

- Does not rush to align in blocs.

- Does not view competition as annihilation.

It understands that history is cyclical, not linear.

Where many nations seek survival, India executes continuity.

Diplomacy shaped by memory is diplomacy that does not fear time.

Negotiation as Non-Violence in Action

Non-violence, in the Indian tradition, has never meant the absence of strength.

It has meant discipline in the use of strength.

Diplomacy is non-violence applied to policy.

Non-violence is:

- Not surrender, but restraint
- Not inaction, but intentional action
- Not weakness, but mastery over reaction

Negotiation in this view is not compromise — it is recognition of shared humanity, even in conflict.

This is visible in:

- India's humanitarian corridors during wars
- Peacekeeping without territorial claim
- Dialogue with adversaries without hostility
- Aid without expectation of alignment

Violence seeks victory.

Non-violence seeks resolution.

Resolution is stronger.

Because victory ends battles.

Resolution ends conflict.

This is *karuṇā* as strategic logic.

Civilizational Confidence and the Grammar of Leadership

The current global system suffers from paranoia, scarcity thinking, and identity insecurity.

India offers another grammar of leadership:

- Confidence without aggression
- Identity without exclusion
- Ambition without domination

This is possible because Indian identity is not based on sameness, but on coexistence.

India does not need to erase diversity to maintain unity — it has always been unity through multiplicity.

This is the foundation of a new leadership model for the world:

Western Leadership	Indian Civilizational Leadership
Lead by dominance	Lead by resonance
Influence by force	Influence by meaning
Protect by control	Protect by dignity
Seek allegiance	Offer partnership

A civilization becomes a global guide not when it seeks disciples, but when it inspires equals.

India does not want followers.

India wants co-travelers.

This is civilizational confidence — quiet, steady, expansive.

The Future Horizon: Karuṇā as Global Framework
The modern world is reaching the limit of power built on fear:

- Planetary ecological collapse
- Digital psychological exhaustion
- Nationalist suspicion and paranoia
- Technological dehumanization
- Polarization of identities

The language of domination is failing.

A new diplomatic grammar is emerging — one based on interdependence, not supremacy.

Karuṇā offers:

- A policy of shared flourishing
- A society of mutual dignity
- A world of responsibility-based sovereignty

This is not idealism.

It is a survival ethic for the planet.

India's role is not to assert that it knows the truth.

India's role is to remind the world that truth can still guide power.

When power regains conscience, geopolitics becomes humane again.

This is not a return to the past.

It is the next stage of world evolution.

The Diplomacy of Listening: Karuṇā as Strategic Intelligence

Most diplomatic frameworks privilege speaking — issuing statements, setting terms, asserting positions. But India's civilizational strength has often emerged from listening, a practice rooted in the Upanishadic tradition where knowledge begins not with speech, but with śravaṇa — attentive presence.

Listening is not silence; it is perception sharpened by empathy.

In international relations, listening means:

- Hearing what a nation fears, not only what it demands.
- Recognizing the emotional history behind political postures.
- Seeing conflicts not as events but as symptoms of deeper wounds.

This is not passive.

It is a strategic insight.

Listening allows India to negotiate where others escalate, to enter conversations where others build walls.

This is why India is often invited into conflicts as mediator rather than as bloc-partner.

A nation that listens becomes a bridge in a world of barricades.

Karuṇā here is not softness —

It is the strength to see the human inside the geopolitical.

This form of diplomacy reduces miscalculation — the source of most wars.

It restores foreign policy to its original purpose: to prevent suffering, not redistribute it.

V. MULTILAYER IDENTITY: INDIA'S PLURAL SELF AND GLOBAL PLURALITY

Nations built on homogeneity fear diversity.

They see difference as a threat to unity.

But India was never one language, one race, one god, or one story.

India is a civilizational federation of:

- Philosophical schools
- Religious streams
- Ecological regions
- Cultural lineages
- Knowledge systems

This identity is not constructed — it is embodied.

Because India's unity is rooted in coexistence, not sameness, it has no anxiety about difference.

This gives modern India a diplomatic advantage:

Homogeneous Identity States	India's Civilizational Identity
Must defend borders of identity	Identity expands to include
Diversity threatens cohesion	Diversity is cohesion
Dialogue is concession	Dialogue is enrichment
Culture is artifact	Culture is process

This identity makes India intuitively global, not merely international.

India does not need to learn pluralism for diplomacy

—
It lives pluralism as everyday reality.

This is why the slogan *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is not a strategic narrative.

It is a self-description.

India can speak to Africa, the Middle East, East Asia, Europe, and Latin America without translation at the level of shared moral values.

This is soft power as inner coherence.

The Inner Technology of Statesmanship

Today's diplomacy is driven by external technology — satellites, data analytics, algorithmic prediction, AI war-gaming.

But India's tradition emphasizes inner technology:

- *sānti*: clarity under pressure
- *viveka*: discrimination between reaction and response
- *vairāgya*: freedom from ego-based decision-making
- *karuṇā*: the discipline of empathy
- *dharma*: alignment with cosmic and moral order

This inner technology prevents:

- Panic in moments of crisis
- Overreaction to provocation
- Seduction by temporary geopolitical gains
- Hatred disguised as patriotism

Where outer technology manages information, inner technology manages consciousness.

A statesman trained only in strategy wins battles.

A statesman trained in consciousness prevents wars.

The Indian diplomatic tradition does not treat emotional intelligence as “soft skill.”

It treats it as the highest instrument of power.

Because the greatest victories are:

- The war avoided
- The neighbour stabilized
- The dignity preserved
- The humanity upheld

Karuṇā here becomes the architecture of statecraft — not sentimental, but structural.

The Courage to Be Gentle: Power Beyond Domination
Across modern strategic theory, power is primarily defined through the lens of domination—control over resources, narratives, and outcomes. But the Indian

civilizational tradition defines power differently. *Shakti* is not merely the force to conquer; it is the capacity to uphold life. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, the Goddess does not destroy for pleasure; She restores balance. Her power is protective, regenerative, and luminous, not extractive.

This distinction is not poetic romanticism.

It carries concrete diplomatic significance.

When a nation sees power as domination, it imagines security only through expansion, alliances, and deterrence. When power is understood as self-mastery, the focus shifts from external conquest to inner clarity, from escalation to equilibrium, from fear to courage. To be gentle is not to be weak.

Gentleness requires a stable center, unwavering self-respect, and emotional discipline.

Hegemonic power says:

“Fear me.”

Dharmic power says:

“Trust me.”

The first compels obedience.

The second invites cooperation.

This is why India's foreign policy often appears subtle from the outside — it does not dramatize its intentions. India negotiates longer, speaks less, and intervenes only when necessary. Critics sometimes misread this as indecision. But in truth, it is measured response — the discipline to avoid irreversible mistakes.

The Mahabharata teaches that even a just war must be the last option, undertaken only when every avenue of dialogue has been exhausted. This is not cowardice. It is a moral responsibility: a recognition that war is never victory, only tragedy divided unevenly.

A civilization that has seen empires rise and fall without any permanent conqueror does not worship conquest. It worships continuity.

And continuity requires:

- Restraint in the exercise of force
- Compassion as a lens of perception
- The ability to see the Other, not as enemy, but as another self
-

This is the courage to be gentle —

the strength that does not need spectacle.

In an age of loud sovereignties, India's quiet confidence is not a weakness to fix — it is the wisdom the world is running out of.

VI. CONCLUSION — TOWARD A DHARMIC ARCHITECTURE OF POWER

In a world where international relations is increasingly defined by velocity, visibility, and strategic anxiety, the Indian civilizational idea of power offers a deeper grammar of statecraft. It teaches that power is neither domination nor withdrawal, but the disciplined capacity to act without aggression and to restrain without fear. This vision does not romanticize peace, nor does it glorify conflict. Rather, it understands that the legitimacy of power lies in its capacity to preserve balance.

India's diplomatic practice—whether in multilateral negotiations, humanitarian assistance, climate diplomacy, or conflict mediation—has consistently reflected this ethic of self-restraint and responsibility. Even when the global system incentivizes competition, India has emphasized cooperation, placing dialogue, development, and moral reciprocity at the foundation of its engagements. This is not weakness; it is strategic continuity rooted in a civilizational consciousness.

As technological systems expand into realms that shape identity, perception, memory, and time itself, the question before humanity is not merely what we will build but what we will become. The Indian tradition reminds us that no system—digital or political—can endure without an ethical center. Power without wisdom collapses; growth without compassion corrodes; intelligence without conscience endangers.

The future of international relations will not belong to the loudest, the richest, or the most aggressive—but to those who can create trust, restore balance, and hold space for coexistence. In this respect, India's civilizational idea of power is not an alternative among many—it is a necessary horizon for the stability of the twenty-first century world order.

If the global future is to be sustainable, cooperative, and meaningfully free, then the world must learn to value not only strength, but the dignity that guides strength. And in that journey, India does not claim to lead—it simply continues to remember.

Power without compassion is unstable.

Compassion without power is ineffective.

The world now needs both.

India's civilizational heritage offers a way to harmonize them:

- Strength without cruelty
- Leadership without subjugation
- Presence without domination
- Identity without exclusion
- Ambition without arrogance

This is not a foreign policy strategy.

It is a civilizational offering.

The 21st century will not be shaped by the strongest empire —

but by the civilization that teaches the world how to remain human while becoming powerful.

And India is ready.

Not to rule the world.

But to help the world remember itself.

This is the century of Karuṇā.

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