

THE US SECURITY LEADERSHIP IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC AND CHINA'S COUNTERMEASURES

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Abstract

The Asia-Pacific has emerged as the central playing field for strategic competition between the United States and China. The US is increasing its footprints in the region to contain China in its neighbourhood and not to allow it to expand its sphere of influence. China perceives the Security leadership role of the US against its sovereignty and core national interests. To neutralise the security leadership of the US, Beijing is focusing on a soft balancing approach based on its economic prowess and diplomatic tools. China is seeking ways to attract the US allies to counter the US containment policy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and regional economic initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). This paper sheds light on the broader context of China's attempt to neutralise the Security leadership of the US in Asia-Pacific and to secure its core national interests.

Keywords: *Asia-Pacific, China, US, RCEP, competition*

Introduction

The advent of the 21st century brought with it a shift from the 'American Century' towards the 'Asian Century' and considerably enhanced the significance of the Asia-Pacific region. The Asia-Pacific

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has emerged as the central playing field for the strategic competition between the United States and China. Both the great powers are employing different strategies in the power struggle to counter the influence of each other and they have their reasons to do so.

The US is increasing its footprints in the region to contain China in its neighbourhood and not allow it to expand its sphere of influence. The US feels threatened, due to China's increasing economic and military influence. Washington is aware of the fact that China has the potential to destroy the superpower status of America and to deal with China they have adopted a hegemonic approach to tackle the increasing influence of China in the international system in general and particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. It has devised a full-blown China containment policy to prevent it from dominating the US sphere of influence and impeding the geopolitical interests of the US. That is evident from the US 'Pivot to Asia' policy developed back in 2011, which has guided American manoeuvres and policy in a region extending from the United States Pacific coast to India.

The US accelerated its efforts towards China's containment under the Donald Trump administration. Surprisingly, the National Security Strategy (NSS-2017) in Trump's era which was, initially set to be released to the public at the end of 2042,¹ revealed rare insights into how the US perceives its opponents and allies in the region. The strategy focused on strategies to maintain the US strategic edge and promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing its sphere of influence through the so-called 'new-illiberal sphere of influence'. The Declassification of the National Security Strategy (NSS-2017) before time, was a symbolic effort by President Trump to put pressure on China and to accelerate its anti-China efforts in the form of an ongoing trade war, US commitment to the defence of Taiwan, and accusing Beijing of hiding the outbreak of Covid-19.

The US leadership is currently employing the hegemonic and hard military approach to challenge the rise of China. It is exploiting

the volatile situation in the Asia-Pacific due to competing claims over issues of the East and the South China Sea. The US raised the level of hostility through the revival of Quad, by approving large defence deals with Taiwan including military capacity building, security alliances in the region, multilateral exercises, and deployment of sophisticated military hardware. China perceives the security leadership role of the US against its sovereignty and core national interests. To neutralise the security leadership of the US, the Chinese are focusing on a soft balancing approach based on their economic prowess and diplomatic tools. China is seeking ways to attract the US allies to counter the US containment policy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and regional economic initiatives such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The success of Chinese efforts can be measured in terms of its success in attracting the regional allies of the US. Beijing believes that after the integration of these states into its economic ventures, it would neutralise an all-out anti-China military alliance in the region. It is within this context that this paper sheds light on the broader context of China's attempt to neutralise the security leadership of the US in the Asia-Pacific and to secure its core national interests.

South China Sea: A Bone of Contention between Major Powers

The South China Sea spans from Singapore to the Taiwan Strait. Covering an area of 1.4 million square miles, it is composed of several islands, reefs, and rocks. The South China Sea is critical for economic, military, and strategic purposes and is rich in resources like oil and gas reserves. The competing claims of regional states like China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia over this territory and waters of the South China Sea is making it one of the most controversial and contested regions in the world. China has asserted it as a core national interest and says that it has irrefutable sovereignty over it. The region is extremely important for the regional

and global powers including China, Japan, and the US due to its strategic location. This region has considerable importance because it is the hub of economic maritime passage from the West to the East. Around \$5 trillion worth of goods flow through these waters² and its seabed contains 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.³ Other than that, 80 per cent of Asian trade passes through this region, which is nearly one-third of all of the world's maritime trade.

The South China Sea has not always been in a conflict situation. However, tensions escalated when China started building artificial islands in this region and inside the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Philippines and Malaysia according to its nine-dash line plan. This claim was made by China because of the number of lines on the original map made by a Chinese geographer Yang Hua rein.⁴ The claim was rejected by the contesting parties because, according to them, it did not fall under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Since most of the Asian region was ruled by Chinese emperors, China still considers the South China Sea as its part because of its geopolitical importance. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) issued its judgement and upheld the rights of the ASEAN claimants to their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), noting that the Chinese claims had no legal basis. Even though China has at times signalled to claim the area with military power, it is not considering war as an option and itself wishes to avoid a military confrontation. China is probably going to achieve enough influence within the region to challenge and force the US out of the South China Sea. Beijing does not attempt to provoke a war with its neighbours because it would be too costly and harmful. This is especially because a war with America and its East Asian allies would not be worth the potential territorial gains. Instead, China is working from a rational viewpoint. At a similar time, it is progressively evident that China is not content with

maintaining the current status quo of the US within the regional balance of power.

China's assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region busted the vacuum for the US to play a major security leadership role. The US denounced the unilateral actions by China and termed them against the established norms to impose its will on the region. Many regional countries contesting over the South China Sea intended to become the US allies. They welcomed the engagement of the US to ward off the overwhelming Chinese influence in the region. They preferred a dynamic equilibrium to deter coercion and conflict. The involvement of the US in Asia-Pacific to keep a close eye on the maritime status, navigational freedom, and its commitments to regional countries infuriated China. Beijing considers it as an effort against their core national interests and international stakes. To deal with the growing influence of the US, China is currently pursuing a soft approach to counter the alliance led by the US. It is monitoring the regional developments carefully and is working on long-term policies aimed at dealing with the imminent security threat posed by the US and its allies in the region.

New Challenges for China

The new pressing developments in the Asia-Pacific region suggests that all is not well for China as the US is preparing a playing field to challenge the regional influence of China. Both states are driving the region towards chaos, hostility, and instability.

Revival of Quad

The revival of Quad poses a serious challenge to the growing influence of China both at the regional and international levels. The Quad is an informal security alliance of Australia, Japan, India, and the US aimed at creating a rule-based order in the Asia-Pacific region. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave the idea of a security diamond at the confluence of the two seas that would ensure the

interests of like-minded democracies.⁵ The main reason behind the formation of the Quad is to make a security partnership against China. The Quad countries are taking special measures such as joint exercises for advancing military interoperability and to improve their capacity in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent development of the first Quad Summit under President Biden on 12 March 2021, along with Prime Minister Modi of India, Japanese Premier Yoshihide Suga, and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison emphasised the need for an open and free Indo-Pacific region.⁶ They signalled to China that they would not accept China's assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region and that the security alliance led by the US aimed to balance the Chinese threat and maintain a balance of power. The Quad members have their own unique set of strategic imperatives to revive the quadrilateral arrangement and to send out a signal to China that it is serious about its China containment policy.

If we look at India, it will benefit in terms of taking care of the threats to its security, as was evident from the Doklam and Ladakh crises. It will also benefit from bilateral US arms transfers, sharing of intelligence, military exercises, logistics, trade and investment relationships, and its status as a major power that played a major role in the making of a redesigned world order less susceptible to Chinese power. Japan on the other hand considers the revival of Quad to secure its maritime security and to balance China's advancing military capacity. It is also actively working with the Quad members to safeguard its national interests related to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Australia considers itself as an anchor of a peaceful and rule-based order in the Asia-Pacific and it has ramped up its efforts to challenge Chinese actions in the South China Sea.

China, on the other hand, perceives the revival of Quad led by the US against its economic, military, trade, and maritime interests. China accuses the US of stoking tensions in the region to achieve its vested interests and to maintain its global primacy.

Multilateral Exercises

The second most destabilising factor and challenge faced by China is the multilateral exercises in the Asia-Pacific region. The Malabar exercise is one of the most important multilateral exercises that began in 1992 as a bilateral exercise between the Indian Navy and the US Navy. Japan became its permanent member in 2015 and now Australia has also been included in it in 2020.⁷ There is now a consensus among Quad states that China is a major threat to open societies, economic self-reliance, rule-based regime, and liberal democracy. The Malabar exercise strengthened the cooperation and resolve of these states to act against any Chinese attempts to impose its hegemony under the leadership of the US.

The other important development in the region in terms of the multilateral exercises was the French-led multinational exercise called 'Le Perouse' commenced in the Bay of Bengal on 5 April 2021. All Quad countries participated in it along with France. China considers the joint military exercise as a publicity stunt to draw more NATO members into its Indo-Pacific military framework and to invite them to cooperate with the future military operations in the region led by the US.

The other important pressing development was the two-week joint military exercise between the US and Philippines in the South China sea, starting 12 April 2021.⁸ The annual Balikatan exercise came amidst the rising China-US tensions in the South China Sea. China, in a response to the US provocation, deployed a carrier task group led by the aircraft carrier Liaoning, accompanied by the latest Type 055 destroyer for the first time this year in the region.⁹ All these developments and the gathering of many rival warships in the proximity suggest a worrying trend in the region. The situation is highly volatile and has the potential to lead the US and China to an armed conflict.

Arms Sales to Taiwan

China considers Taiwan as its sovereign part and, since 1949, it has never diplomatically recognised the democratically ruled Taiwan. When the US and China first established diplomatic relations in the 1970s the US pledged to engage only in economic and unofficial relations with Taiwan. Under the government's One China principle, any country that maintains relations with China is not allowed to recognise Taiwan diplomatically. But, in recent years, tensions are running high over Taiwan between the US and China. The US is deepening the relationship with self-ruled Taiwan due to China's military activity around the island. The US is supporting Taiwan through arms sales to modernise its armed forces and to maintain a credible defensive capability. The US has planned to sell armed MQ-9 Reaper drones, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, air-launched SLAM and mobile light rocket launchers to Taiwan.¹⁰ Recently, the head of Taiwan's defence ministry's strategic planning section announced that Taipei was looking forward to procuring air-to-surface missiles with a possible range of 925 km from the US.¹¹ The purpose is to bolster the defence capability and to give Taiwanese aircraft the capability to hit targets far inside China over the South China Sea. China strongly opposed the plans of arms sales to Taiwan and urged the US to cease US-Taiwan military contacts. President Biden sent former US senator Chris Dodd and former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage to Taipei which further raised the level of hostility between the US and China. The American side described the trip as a personal signal aimed at their commitment to Taiwan and its democracy. China reacted by holding live-fire drills off the Taiwan Strait¹² as a clear warning to foreign powers not to intervene in what it sees as its internal matter. These developments indicate that Taiwan is one of the major sources of tension between the US and China. China considers it as meddling in its internal affairs and an effort by the US to play a major security leadership role in the region.

First US-Japan Summit under the Biden Administration

The US and Japan have renewed their alliance in all domains in the first summit under the Biden administration. US President Joe Biden and Japan's Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide vowed to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Both sides exchanged views regarding China's activities in the region, conflicts in the East and the South China Sea, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. They also discussed ways to boost their defence capabilities and to further their alliance to maintain regional security. They issued a joint statement, where we can see that the Biden administration has shown more inclination towards promoting Japan's role in enhancing regional security. They also discussed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and publicly mentioned Taiwan for the first time since 1969.¹³ Their Joint statement irked China, which expressed its opposition to it. China in response reiterated its 'One-China Principle' and supreme sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the waters around them.

Strategic Competition Act

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee of the US has approved the Strategic Competition Act of 2021. It is a recipe for a New-Cold War and depicts China as the most serious current and future threat to the US, its allies, and global interests in multiple areas including technology, economics, and military security. The overall thrust of the Strategic Competition Act of 2021 is that China is an adversary that cannot be negotiated with. The act also specifies that it does not promote military solutions to the US-China conflicts. But it does promote the US cooperation with allies as well as reinforcement of the US capabilities to counter China. It is an exaggerated depiction of the threats China poses to the US and the world. In a nutshell, the Strategic Competition Act has the potential to further complicate the troubled relationship between the US and China.

These all-pushing developments in the Asia-Pacific regions show that the US is playing a major security leadership role one way or the other. It is collaborating with regional countries to form an alliance against China to challenge its assertiveness. On the other hand, it has deployed its finest maritime war assets in the region including USS Ronald Reagan and USS Theodore Roosevelt supercarriers, B-52 bombers, F-35 aircraft, USS Montgomery littoral combat ships, and an amphibious assault warship.¹⁴ China perceives these developments as a threat to its national security and is working on countermeasures to neutralise the security leadership of the US through a soft-balancing approach.

Countermeasures by China

China is concerned about the growing regional influence of the US and is trying hard to counter it through a soft-balancing approach.

China's Economic Initiatives

Since a military conflict will be costly, China is seeking other ways to counter the US-led security and containment efforts in the Asia-Pacific region. It understands that China's real strength is its economic prowess and strong economic ties with the neighbouring small and middle powers. It is working on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), economic initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to counter an all-out anti-China military alliance in the region. Through the BRI, Beijing aims to invest more than \$1 trillion in 72 countries. Besides the investment in the infrastructure development sector, China has also emerged as the world's largest creditor, having lent more than \$1.5 trillion around the globe.¹⁵ Similarly, it has also planned two economic corridors, the China-Indochina Peninsula corridor and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor under the BRI projects for regional integration.

Primarily, the BRI was a domestic development strategy to fix the imbalance between various industries and regions. Now, the BRI is a global project to open China and its economic diplomacy. The US perceives it as a political and economic threat to its interests. Washington is worried about a new type of globalisation that China has initiated, to counterbalance the US hegemony in geopolitics and the global economy.

The success of Chinese efforts can be measured in terms of its success in attracting the US regional allies to join its economic initiatives. It is visible from the fact that Australia, India, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam are members of the AIIB. The other most important development in the region was the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between the 15 Asia-Pacific countries. It was the biggest free trade deal between 10 Southeast Asian economies along with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and China.¹⁶ The RCEP solidifies China's regional geopolitical ambitions around the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and will help them to draft the rules of trade in the region. It also provides a major signal to investors that the Asia-Pacific region is still committed to multilateral trade integration. RCEP is considered a victory over US leadership in Asia, making China the leading protector of regional free trade, as the US pulled itself out of Trans-Pacific-Partnership (TPP) under President Trump. The success of China is visible as some of the closest US partners like Australia and Japan joined the RCEP. These economic initiatives will help China and other regional countries to lower their level of hostility. Their close cooperation related to economic and trade links will help them to avert a major conflict in the region.

China and regional countries of the Pacific coast have political and military disputes, but they do not allow their divergent interests in any area of interaction to deter the convergent ones in others. They are rather inclined to preserve and create space for cooperation in the

economic sector. Today, Japan is China's third-largest source of foreign investment and third-largest trading partner. The trade volume has increased from \$1 billion to some \$317 billion over the past 45 years.¹⁷ China is Japan's largest export market and trading partner and represents more than 20 per cent of Japan's total trade. The success of China is visible from the fact that Japan had refused to join Trump's trade war with China and later joined the RCEP, which is dominated by China. The other important country in the Asia-Pacific is Australia. The Australia-China bilateral relationship is based on strong economic and trade complementarities. The relationship between the two powers is considered a comprehensive strategic partnership. China is Australia's largest two-way trading partner in goods and services and their two-way trade reached \$251 billion in 2019-20.¹⁸ China remained Australia's largest services export market, particularly in education and tourism. On the other hand, China is the sixth-largest foreign direct investor in Australia. Chinese investors have invested around \$46 billion in Australia in 2019 accounting for 4.5 per cent of total foreign direct investment. So, China can utilise its economic prowess to press Australia to move away from a zero-sum mentality and to seek cooperation without abusing the concept of national security to pressure cooperation with China.

The other most important economic relationship in the region is between China and ASEAN. China has officially claimed to interact with Southeast Asian counterparts in accordance with its 2+7 cooperation framework, which covers economics, security, and development issues. China's primary focus is to advance cooperation on finance, development, and trade. They also focus on non-traditional security, economics, and development cooperation, which are elements of China's enhanced engagement in the region. The other most important development was that ASEAN became China's largest trading partner in 2020, with 7 per cent growth and the trade volume hitting \$731.9 billion.¹⁹ China and ASEAN have enjoyed strong regional

economic reciprocity, which has played a significant part in the growth of bilateral trade and economic cooperation.

The other most important development is that recently, Chinese firms, banks and government bodies have increasingly invested in large hydropower projects in the Mekong sub-region. Chinese institutions turn to Southeast Asia, where they are involved in more than 50 ongoing large hydropower projects in Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos. These Chinese institutions maintained a strong influence on environmental and social practices as well as on trade and diplomatic relations. All these developments gave China the leverage to counter the security leadership of the US in the region and to achieve its own political, economic, security, and trade interests.

Vaccine Diplomacy

The second most important policy option for China was to conduct vaccine diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region to counter the US influence. At present, the US and its regional allies like India are faced with a Covid-19 crisis. The latest surge has driven India's fragile health systems to the breaking point and one may assume that they are not able to help other regional states. Surprisingly, China offered help to India by saying that China was willing to provide the necessary support and help to fight Covid-19.²⁰ On the other hand, the recent meeting between the Chinese Foreign Minister and counterparts from Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in China was a positive step to discuss vaccine distribution and help with post-pandemic recovery. This move will improve the trust level between China and Southeast Asia. It also provided China with a rare opportunity to improve its soft image and neutralise the leadership role of the US.

Diplomatic Engagement

The third policy option for China is to utilise diplomatic tools to ease the tension in the East and the South China Sea. China can address the concerns of regional states through diplomatic

engagements and confidence-building measures. As continuous tensions will make the US relevant to the security assurances of the states in the Pacific. It is an opportunity for China to work with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for an effective and substantive code of conduct for all activities in the South China Sea. As any military conflict in the region will lead the region towards chaos, instability, and destruction, by using its economic clout, China can address the threat perceptions of the neighbours and can reduce their dependence on the US security commitments in the region. It is understood that the US military activities in the Asia-Pacific are aimed against China. Therefore, neutralising the stances of allies in the Pacific region will question the undue security leadership of the US in the region.

Defensive Capabilities

The fourth policy option for China is to develop its defensive capabilities to deal with the emerging threat from the US-led Quad. As China's prominence has risen in the international arena, so too has its global interests. To protect its geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic goals, it should develop strong power projection capabilities. It should understand that the regional strategic landscape is going through profound changes. The US and its regional allies have adjusted their national security and defence strategies in a way that provoked strategic competition. The US is engaging in technological and institutional innovation in pursuit of absolute military superiority. These developments are raising alarm bells for China, which should focus on defensive capabilities to protect its national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, maritime rights, and interests. On the other hand, it can improve its soft image through actively participating in the UN peacekeeping operations and international humanitarian assistance and by maintaining the security of international passages. It will help to counter the growing influence of the US and to safeguard Chinese core national interests.

Conclusion

The overall developments in the Asia-Pacific region show that the US is playing a major security leadership role and pursuing its policy to contain the rise of China. The greater US engagement in the Asia-Pacific region shows its quest to dominate the region because the US believes that the future of world politics would be decided in Asia. The once-neglected region emerged as the central playing field between the major powers and gained popularity due to its tremendous economic growth. The region in recent years has experienced greater hostility due to the contention of sovereignty over disputed areas. These disputes forced the regional states to heavily invest in their defence sector and modernise their armies. The region's significance has also increased due to the rise of potential rivals in the shape of China and the US trying hard to contain their potential rivals in its neighbourhood. They are adopting a rebalancing political and military strategy in the region to contain the influence of China. On the other hand, China is focusing on a soft-balancing approach and still adheres to its policy of peaceful development. But recent developments indicate that they are more assertive in stabilising the external environment necessary for its economic development.

Now, China is very much concerned about the developments in the region like the revival of Quad, Multilateral exercises aimed against it, the US arms supplies to Taiwan, and close collaboration between Japan and the US. To neutralise the influence of the US, China is focusing on trade links through the BRI, AIIB, and RCEP. It believes that economic joint ventures, trade links, diplomatic engagement, and its soft approach towards regional countries would counter an all-out anti-China alliance in the region. The regional countries of Southeast Asia are feeling the heat of the tussle between the US and China. They are trapped in an uneasy situation and are trying hard to balance their relations with both great powers. They do not support the element of

competition in the region and advocate reliance on rule-based regimes and mechanisms to ensure the settlement of longstanding disputes to avert a major military clash in the region. They also tried to encourage the claimant states to address various security challenges ahead without becoming embroiled in existing territorial, political and strategic rivalries that have the potential to undermine regional stability and security apparatus. Therefore, all regional, extra-regional and major powers should work together to resolve their key issues through peaceful means. They should increase their diplomatic engagements to build trust levels to seek comprehensive solutions to all existing problems in the domain of politics, economics, and the military.

The other important aspect is a shift in the US policy from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, which gives India a leading partner role in the containment of China. China perceives the role of India against its national interests and considers it as a security threat to its regional and international ambitions. India is desperately working on a single-point agenda to counter the Chinese influence in its neighbourhood and to achieve that goal they are looking for enhanced cooperation with the US. In recent years, the growing defence cooperation between India and the US raised alarm bells not only for China but also for Pakistan. Both countries consider it as a security threat to their political, economic, and security interests. China is concerned about the Malacca dilemma. India has naval capabilities near the Indian Ocean choke points, especially around the Malacca strait which connects the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific. These waters hold a lot of importance for China since it is a crucial route for trade and energy. Eighty per cent of China's oil imports come through the Malacca strait and China is concerned about their maritime interests as India has been strengthening its maritime cooperation with the Quad countries. To counter the regional hegemony of India, China started China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to obtain another route to

secure its trade, economic, and maritime interests. On the other hand, Pakistan considers its strategic partnership with China as a counterforce against the Indian regional aspirations. China, through its economic initiatives, vaccine diplomacy, diplomatic engagement, and defensive capabilities, is successfully countering the US leadership role in the Asia-Pacific region. The study shows that China has successfully lured the Pacific countries into its economic orbit through the BRI, AIIB, RCEP, ASEAN 2+7 cooperation framework and its hydropower projects in the Mekong regions.

The developments discussed in the study show that the US has shifted its focus from European affairs into Asian affairs and is playing a greater security role in the region. The region of Asia-Pacific has emerged as the playing field for the strategic competition between the US and China. Both are employing different strategies to undermine the influence of each other. The US is employing a hard military approach and to counter it China is using its economic prowess. Their efforts have the potential to lead the region towards uncertainty and instability. To avoid any major conflict, they should focus on ways to resolve their differences and move towards sustainable peace. It will be a great favour to the regional stability and development.

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