



Tripartite Relations between India, China and the USA

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has remained the world's sole super power. It has over the past two decades vigorously pursued its national interests, and been deeply involved in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

During this period, China has made colossal strides in its economic growth, and also developed its military potential considerably to lay claims to becoming a global power. While non alignment progressively became less relevant, India broke away from its economic fetters and made substantial progress towards realizing its aspirations of becoming a regional power. The concept of a strategic triangle is utilized in international relations, where three major countries affect each other in a manner that the important issues in a dyad often affect the third country. The degree of impact determines the nature of the strategic triangle.

Lowell Dittmer defined the concept of a 'strategic triangle' as a sort of transactional game among three states, where each state recognizes the strategic salience of the three principals, and the relationship between any two states affects or is affected by the third. The relations between India, China and USA affect Asia significantly. The thesis proposes to examine if a 'Strategic Triangle' exists or is emerging between India, China and the USA and to understand the dynamics of such a triangle. using the solar power one can reduce the harmful effect on environment and provide economical, efficient and environment friendly sustainable energy.

KEYWORDS : Tripartite, India, China, USA

Introduction

During the Cold War, geopolitics between USA and Soviet Unions saw a distinct shift when USA began to engage China meaningfully. It took full advantage of the triangular dynamics between the three countries. "Heavy traffic among the three powers and the three states power struggle, jostling for a better position vis-a-vis the other two, has led to the talk of the rise of a strategic triangle in the cold war era".¹

Lowell Dittmer pioneered the concept of 'Strategic Triangle' from a rational choice perspective, wherein he saw a triangle as "a sort of transactional game among three players".² According to him, there exist three ideal type patterns in a triangular exchange: the 'ménage à trois', comprising symmetrical amities among three players; the 'romantic triangle', consisting of a 'pivot' player's amity with two wing players, but enmity between the latter two; and 'stable marriage', comprising amity between two of the players and enmity of the two with the third.³

In the study of China, the question that is often asked is whether 'China is becoming a responsible stakeholder', which then leads on to the rationality of choices that it makes. "Looking back over the past 15 years and looking forward to the next 10 or 15, the trend is clear that China is becoming a responsible stakeholder".⁴ China watchers are faced with numerous challenges regularly. "If chess is about decisive battle, wei qi (China's most enduring game) is about the protracted campaign. The chess player aims for total victory. The wei qi player seeks relative advantage".⁵

Western scholars are not uniform regarding the type of power that China is evolving into. "China moved from being a revolutionary revisionist state to a more status quo-oriented one in forty-odd years".⁶ Others feel that the situation is more complex. "China is surely not a responsible stakeholder; but then, few nations are. Urging China to become a better member of the global community and a better global citizen is quite legitimate, as long as one recognizes the aspirational nature of these expectations and takes into account China's history, low income per capita and improving conduct".⁷ Thus it may be worthwhile to wait and observe the unfolding of events for now, to arrive at a definitive conclusion on China's international behaviour.

It has often been stated that due to China's strategic location at the

centre of the Eurasian landmass, it has indulged in a number of complex and multi-dimensional triangular relations. "China also conducted diplomacy within numerous strategic triangles: with the United States and Japan, the USSR and Japan, the USSR and Vietnam, Vietnam and Cambodia, South and North Korea, and India and Pakistan, among others".⁸

In recent times, the focus of the world has moved to Asia, where China and India are progressing steadily to a new economic and military peak. Till a decade ago some observers did not have a vivid picture of the triangle. "The post Cold War Chinese- Indian- US triangular relationship differs in several ways from the Sino-Soviet-US triangle of the Cold War era. First of all, the new triangle is weak in the sense that the dominant issues in each dyad of the relationship do not relate to the third power".⁹ The situation has changed substantially now.

It would be the endeavor of this study to ascertain the nature of the relationship, initially through the dyad of relationships between each set of countries. It would also be fruitful to evaluate areas of geopolitics/ geo-economics where the triangular nature of relations between the three countries has emerged, if any. Thereafter, we would attempt to gauge the dynamics of geopolitics in Asia and the profile of this strategic triangle.

Sino-Indian Relations

Post independence, India was among the first few countries to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with China on 01 April 1950. Ironically, "though China seized Tibet in 1950",¹⁰ India did not register any protest with Beijing".¹¹ The period following the Bandung Conference in 1955 saw a decline in the bilateral relations, as "China refused to accept the McMahon Line as a final demarcation of the border between India and the PRC".¹² The situation worsened when the Dalai Lama fled Tibet for India in 1959. A number of border skirmishes over territorial claims eventually led to the 1962 war between India and China.

1. Border Dispute and Attempts at Resolution - The border dispute between India and China has essentially arisen due to Chinese territorial claims. "China continues to be in occupation of large areas of Indian Territory. In Aksai Chin in Ladakh, China is in physical possession of approximately 38,000 sq km of Indian Territory since the mid-1950s. In addition, Pakistan illegally ceded

5,180 sq km of Indian Territory in the Shaksam Valley of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, north of the Siachen Glacier, to China in 1963 under a boundary agreement that India does not recognize.

The visit of PM Rajiv Gandhi to China in December 1988 marked the resumption of political dialogue at the highest level. A Joint Working Group (JWG) was established on the boundary question, to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution; as also a Joint Economic Group (JEG) on economic and commercial issues.¹³ The border dispute till now has remained unresolved, due to claims and counterclaims by the two countries, despite fourteen rounds of talks. However, a set of CBMs is in place that ensures peace and tranquility at present.

2. Nuclear Issues - China first demonstrated its nuclear bomb capability in 1964. It tested a plutonium device in 1968. Apparently these had been made with Russian assistance. Till now, China has carried out 45 tests. "In 2006 a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency estimate presented to the Senate Armed Services Committee was that China currently has more than 100 nuclear warheads".¹⁴ India has a declared nuclear No-First-Use policy and is in the process of developing a nuclear doctrine based on 'credible minimum deterrence'.¹⁵

3. India's Strategic Encirclement - The String of Pearls Strategy adopted by China, according to some analysts, came into sharp focus in 2004. The assessed aim then appeared to be "building strategic relationships from Middle East to Southern China".¹⁶ With development initiatives at Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Sittwe (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka) it in fact has been successful in carrying out the strategic encirclement of India.

Simultaneously China has been building up its presence in Tibet. The Gormo - Lhasa railway links Beijing to Tibet and was ostensibly engineered to usher in the region's progress. However, it also provides China the capability to deploy rapidly against India. "Within a short period of time, China will be able to mobilize up to 12 divisions on the India-Tibet border. The starting of the railway link will further bolster Chinese effort in expanding military bases and airfields on the India-Tibet border".¹⁷

4. Trade and Economy - In 1984 India and China signed the Most Favoured Nation Agreement. The trade between the two countries has risen to \$ 61.74 bn for 2010. While India's exports stood at \$ 20.86 bn, Chinese exports totaled \$ 40.88bn.¹⁸ Over the last decade China's share in India's foreign trade has increased to 9%. Indian and Chinese investments have become intertwined in each other's economies.¹⁹ Major Chinese projects in India are in infrastructure, roads and bridges, power, heavy equipment and telecommunications.

5. Regional and International Cooperation - India's aspirations for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council have found little support from China. Some analysts feel that China will make sure that India never becomes a permanent member of the UN Security Council, or indeed any worthwhile political body, where she can ever so much think of challenging China's supremacy.²⁰ China's reservations on India signing the NPT are apparent. "When the United States announced its civilian nuclear energy cooperation pact with India in 2005, China indicated displeasure by asking India to sign the NPT and dismantle its nuclear weapons".²¹

India is now an Observer at the SCO where member countries, including China, want to develop a strategic relationship. While, India has not yet been granted membership status, it has been promised Chinese support recently²² and stands to gain through participation at the SCO as it will help ensuring its energy security and maintain due influence on Afghanistan post 2014.

6. Convergence of interests - The India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity²³ has led to

significant improvement in relations and regular talks. Bilateral trade has risen considerably, leading to economic interdependence. The India-China Joint Economic Group (JEG) is closely monitoring issues and their implementation. Chinese and Indian investments in each other's countries are indicative of their respective stakes and commitment. However, outflow of minerals and resources from India is of concern as it is going to deplete her and impede growth ultimately. India and China have often desired a review of the existing mechanism of multilateral institutions such as IMF and the World Bank.²⁴

7. Differences - The border dispute remains to be resolved in spite of 14 rounds of talks. Chinese states that it does not recognize Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of India, and believes that Jammu and Kashmir is disputed territory.²⁵ A lack of sensitivity on part of China to acknowledge Indian core issues is clearly reflected and detrimental to confidence building measures in these domains. Moreover, China has not been very inclined to resolve the contentious issue of Tibet. The Dalai Lama has meanwhile given up the political leadership of Tibetans.

China has been critical of the India-US Agreement and has been attempting to block Indian efforts with the NSG to get ENR (enrichment and reprocessing technologies).²⁶ Simultaneously, they are blatantly supporting Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme to keep tensions alive in South Asia. Diversion of waters of the River Brahmaputra by China is likely to damage ecology and sustenance in India and Bangladesh. A river water treaty is not yet in the offing. Further, China is not very inclined presently to back India's candidacy for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council. It has recently demanded that India delink from Japan, if it wishes Chinese support on the issue.²⁷

US-India Relations

Since independence India has always admired democracy and prosperity in the USA. However, India's path of noz alignment in its early years and its proximity to the Soviet Union prior to the Cold War distanced it from the US. Further, Pakistan was part of American alliances such as CENTO and SEATO. Towards the end of the 1971 war India witnessed aggressive US posturing in the Bay of Bengal, which was followed by US sanctions immediately after the 1974 nuclear explosion.²⁸

A thaw in the relations took place in 1984, when a MoU was signed between India and the USA that allowed transfer of technology for the Cray supercomputer and GE 404 engines. Thereafter, refueling facilities were provided by India to the USAF in 1991 Gulf War. 'Kickleighter' proposals in 1991 and joint naval exercises also happened subsequently. However, the relations saw a downturn with sanctions by the US after India's nuclear tests in 1998. India explained its actions to the US, wherein it cited the nuclear capability/ arsenal of China as the primary threat to India, which needed to be catered for.

The economic reforms undertaken by India in 1991, ushered in growth and prosperity. It opened up India to many US ventures. The end of the Cold War simultaneously, made India seek newer markets for her goods, which resulted in greater links with the US and EU economies. Deeper government engagements took place only after the 1999 Kargil War, during the Jaswant Singh- Strobe Talbott Talks. This resulted in a remarkable transformation of India-US relations.²⁹

1. Strategic Issues - The US has been deeply involved in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. It is concerned with issues such as peace between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and proliferation of nuclear material and missiles. While it appreciates India's contribution in Afghanistan towards training of Afghan civilian and military personnel, development projects, and expanded economic ties, it has to assuage Pakistan, its Major Non NATO Ally.

US has been very concerned with Iran and its nuclear aspirations.

India voted against Iran at the IAEA to counter a race in the West Asian region, notwithstanding our close traditional relations and joint efforts with Iran in Afghanistan. US appreciated the Indian stance on the issue.

India's issues with the US include military aid to Pakistan, as it equips her against India.³⁰ India has been a victim of cross border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, only recently taken note of by the US.

The rise of China is being watched closely by the USA. Efforts by US to take cognizance were evident when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited India in March 2005.³¹ Further impetus was generated when Ms Clinton visited India in July 2011 and stated that India needed to wield its growing economic and political clout further outside its borders and help "shape the future" of the Asia region and beyond.³² For greater engagement with Southeast Asia, US has joined the ASEAN Plus 8 at Hanoi in Oct 2010. India is also a significant member.³³

2. Nuclear Cooperation - During the 1950s, the United States had helped India develop nuclear energy and built a nuclear reactor for India, provided nuclear fuel for some time, while allowing Indian scientists to study at U.S. nuclear laboratories. In 1968, India refused to sign the NPT, finding it discriminatory and tested its first nuclear bomb in 1974. Consequently, the United States isolated India for almost three decades, precluding our development.

On 18 Jul 2005, a new India- US nuclear deal came into shape. The signing of the 123 agreement in Oct 2008 and a subsidiary one on reprocessing, followed by the finalization of agreement on nuclear liability in Aug 2010 cleared the decks for nuclear commerce. "India would be eligible to buy U.S. dual-use nuclear technology, including materials and equipment that could be used to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium, potentially creating the material for nuclear bombs. It would also receive imported fuel for its nuclear reactors."³⁴ It is often surmised that China's rise has led the US to seeking a strategic partnership with India.³⁵

3. Trade and Economy - Major US exports to India include aircraft and aviation-related products, fertilizers, precious stones and metals, organic chemicals, optical and medical instruments. Major components of India's export to the US include gems and jewelry, textiles, pharmaceuticals, organic chemicals, engineering goods and, iron & steel products.³⁶

The US - India Trade Policy Forum has been established for discussion and resolution of trade and investment issues between the United States and India, and is centered on five Focus Groups covering Agriculture; Innovation and Creativity; Investment; Services; Tariffs and Non-Tariff Barriers. In agriculture, there is a commitment to improve the farm to market supply chain and food processing programmes. However, there are issues about reciprocal access to markets and definition of special products, as they affect interests of small scale farmers in India.³⁷

4. Environmental Issues - Agreements on enhancing Cooperation on Energy Security, Energy Efficiency, Clean Energy and Climate Change, and Cooperation on Joint Clean Energy Research and Development Center have been signed between India and US. These will help accelerate development and rapid deployment of critical technologies.³⁸

5. Convergence of interests - Apart from being the two largest democracies with well established practices relating to the legislature, judiciary and media, an important facet in the bilateral relations is the fight against terrorism. The two nations have suffered during the 9/11 and 26/11 terrorist attacks. Though Osama bin Laden stands eliminated, terrorist groups are still intensifying activities in South Asia. This is being jointly countered by intelligence sharing and tackling of terrorist threats.

China's economic rise is enabling swift military modernization, which could pose a conventional threat to India in the medium term and to the US in the long run. China's insatiable quest for resources, energy and transshipment is likely to bring it into confrontation with India and the US.

Common challenges to India and the US are China's nuclear arming of Pakistan that could find its way to terrorists and Iran's nuclear efforts. US are appreciative of India's stance on Iran and its developmental efforts in Afghanistan.

India and the US concluded the NSSP, which is aimed to provide impetus to US export of dual use high technology goods, and civil nuclear and space cooperation with India. In defence cooperation, other than India's acquisition of some US aircraft/ equipment, and participation in training exercises, Indian Navy has assisted US armed forces in Post 2004 Tsunami efforts in Asia. These exchanges are viewed with concern by China.

Trade between India and US has grown over the last two decades eightfold to \$ 49 billion. This accompanies substantial investments by the two countries in each other's economies.

6. Differences - India recently stunned the U.S. defense industry by rejecting two U.S. aircraft manufacturers in the international bid to acquire its next generation fighter.³⁹ This is in keeping with Indian expectations of performance by the aircraft and autonomous decision making. US military aid to Pakistan, has affected Indian security.⁴⁰

India and the US differ over the entry of American farming produce into India as it is detrimental to Indian agriculture. India and the US have serious differences over the latter's efforts on capping carbon dioxide emissions. These featured at Copenhagen in 2009 and now find reflection in resolutions by the BASIC countries. Stiffer US visa norms for Indians are stifling Indian IT profits.⁴¹

India could not fathom the November 2009 joint statement issued by Presidents Obama and Hu, which mentioned mutual support for improved India-Pakistan relations. This acted against India's sensitivities on the issue, as this helped China meddle in this issue, unnecessarily.

Sino-US Relations

The US - China relationship began on a turbulent note with the US support to the Nationalist government against the Communists. It thawed only with the historic visit by President Nixon in 1972 to China. Formal diplomatic recognition to China was finally accorded by the US in Jan 1979. High level exchanges continued thereafter. However, the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 resulted in US condemnation of violation of (Chinese citizens') human rights and imposing of economic sanctions. Meanwhile, the Chinese opened up their economy in 1978, which led to Western hopes for a change in the system.⁴² But this did not materialize.

Tibet is another controversial issue between the US and China. Furthering its brutal suppression of the March 2008 protests, China has defined the goals and tasks for its defence forces to oppose and contain 'separatist forces for Tibet independence'.⁴³ In global issues such as Climate Change, US and other developed nations have faced opposition from China like at Copenhagen in 2009.⁴⁴ During 1995-96, China carried out a series of missile tests in the Taiwan Strait. While this was a signal to deter Taiwanese sentiments for independence, the US retaliated with a display of naval might.

1. Strategic Issues - Post 9/11 China offered complete support to US in the 'Global War on Terrorism'. The PRC voted for operations in Afghanistan and has since participated with US in dialogues on Counterterrorism. It has concurrently made investments in infrastructure including the Aynak Copper mine deal in Afghanistan.

In the Central Asian Region the US has had to establish bases for supporting operations in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Further, since China is also concerned with preventing terrorism from disrupting its Central Asian energy routes and its Xinjiang region, a convergence of interests with US is feasible, if the two agree.

Taiwan is not only a focus area for Washington, but also at the top of Beijing's core interests and finds particular mention in its Defence White Paper. The PRC and the US had to work closely on North Korea and its nuclear weapons program.⁴⁶ The North Korea card is thus being used by China against Japan and US.

While Beijing has settled most of its land borders, there are ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, with Japan in the East Sea, and with North and South Korea in the East China Sea. US military alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and recent partnerships with Vietnam and India, have even led to a belief that the US is preparing to contain (encircle) China and prevent its rise. Realizing the value of regular interaction on strategic matters, a new initiative the U.S.-China Strategic Security Dialogue (SSD) between the US and China has been progressed.⁴⁷

2. Pursuit of Non Proliferation - Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998 were criticized through a Joint US - China statement. This was tantamount to US demanding India to renounce its nuclear weapons, notwithstanding Chinese arsenal/ inventory. India could not accept this, and it led eventually to the Jaswant Singh- Strobo Talbott Talks.⁴⁸

In the nuclear equation between US and China, US reductions are occurring as the Chinese modernize and increase their strategic arsenal. While the actual number of Chinese strategic warheads has remained relatively flat, the addition of road-mobile ICBMs and the reinforcement of its sea-based capabilities mean that the number of weapons that can strike the US has increased. The ratio is likely to come down to 10:1 as per some estimates.⁴⁹

3. Trade and Economy - The US claims that they are for greater Chinese integration, so that it becomes a 'responsible' stakeholder in world affairs. "U.S. China policy has been consistent. For eight consecutive administrations, Democratic and Republican, U.S. policy has been to encourage China's opening and integration into the global system."⁵⁰

4. Convergence of interests - The Chinese and US economies are very complementary and have been closely interlinked in recent times. The highest exports from China go to the US, while it is the second biggest exports from US are to China. Analysts have, however, predicted the decline of the US. "If you're trying to borrow \$9 trillion to save your financial system...and already half your public debt held by foreigners, it's not really the conduct of rising empires, is it?"⁵¹ Thus it is rather evident that US and China have great stakes in each other's economies.

China plays a key role in U.S. policy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). It wields most influence in Pyongyang and hence is the host for the Six-Party Talks over North Korea's nuclear program.

The Strategic and Economic Dialogue between the US and China brings together their top leaders, who discuss issues related to trade, health, development, energy, global institutions, regional security, non proliferation and counter terrorism. Three dialogues have been held till now.

5. Divergence - Taiwan (ROC) continues to be a contentious issue between the US and China. "America's treatment of Taiwan as a de facto nation- state, based on the Taiwan Relations Act, and its gradual upgrading of 'unofficial relations' with Taiwan, particularly its increasing robust sale of advanced weapons to Taiwan have added elements of uncertainty to US- China relations and made a US

- China conflict over Taiwan ever more likely."⁵²

Trade issues are significant. Trade deficit and the valuation of the Chinese Yuan have been contentious issues. China keeps buying up US dollars, whenever its value falls.⁵³ Energy security is another area of concern, wherein the US wants to engage China in cooperative efforts to ensure stable energy markets, support energy efficiency and develop cleaner technologies.⁵⁴

Chinese approach to Human Rights issues and Tibet have often led to discord. The jailing of Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and the 2008 repression in Tibet have led to tension between the two countries. US pacts with Japan, South Korea, Australia and some ASEAN countries often conflict with Chinese regional security interests.

Emergence and Existence of a Strategic Triangle

At this stage, it would be appropriate to take a look at how each of the bilateral relationships has panned out. The nature of the relations can to a certain extent indicate the likely stability or instability that would ensue.

1. India-China Relations - The bilateral relations between India and China have alternated from congruence of purpose to working in isolation. There are some important issues that have elicited cooperation, whereas many others have led to competition. The degree of convergence is distinctly lesser than those on which we diverge at present. China has begun to take note of India only in recent times.

2. India-US Relations - The 21st Century is being seen by many as an Asian century. The US has always had a large role to play in Asia, and the nature of the emerging India - US relationship would to a greatly define the new geopolitical structure of the world. In the last two decades, though there have been some differences in approach to some issues, there has been considerable commonality of views and greater convergence on core values and interests. US feels that India is a key player in Asia and that there is enough to gain from the relationship.

3. US-China Relations - The US today leads the world in the economic, sciences and technology and military fields by a considerable margin. It is also watching the rise of China closely. Some analysts term the US strategy as 'Congaging China'.⁵⁵ US apprehensions on China stem from the substantial divergences in its relations with China, particularly on important security matters.

4. Nature of Strategic Triangle - It is evident from the relative strengths, that US is the most powerful nation. China is rising globally and perhaps sees the US as an obstacle to its strategic aim. India is emerging regionally, but is the weakest of the three. This equation is likely to remain in the next three to four decades.

The US considers India as an emerging power, has commonality of interests, more convergence than divergence, and has supported India's permanent candidature to the UNSC. China is still reluctant to acknowledge India's status and will take some time to do so. Further, it has an appreciable divergence of views with India, views the strategic partnership between US and India with concern, and has spared no effort to block India's aspirations at various forums. The US- China relations have developed over the last decade, however, mistrust and opacity could lead to misunderstandings between them.

The strategic triangle in relations between the three nations is thus one that is emerging slowly but steadily, in an environment, where US is in relative decline. On the other hand, it can be said that though some of the important bilateral issues between the US and China do not directly affect India now, they are bound to affect eventually. India strives for strategic autonomy, but enjoys a unique position as the shape of the future triangle will be decided by its degree of alignment with US or China, either of whom cannot afford to do

without it. While in the present form, India is in a position to decide how close or far to keep from the two powers, progressively this latitude may shrink.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, India has taken many a stride towards attaining her rightful place in the comity of nations. To be counted initially as a regional power and in the long run as a global one, it needs to do a lot more. As it seems now, even in 2025 the US will find itself as the most powerful actor on the world stage. It is likely to remain the key player in Asia, while China will demand an increasingly larger role. India endeavours to become much more significant by then.

The risk of nuclear weapon use over the next decade appears to be greater as a result of converging trends of nuclear proliferation and terrorism, especially in Asia. Clashes over energy between Asian countries are probable. This may have to be prevented by multinational cooperation in protecting critical sea lanes and certain land corridors. Conflicts over water and on cyberspace are also possible. Non state actors will alter conventional calculations. The rise of the BRICS powers is imminent, though they are unlikely to challenge the international system greatly. With growing geopolitical and economic clout, China and India could have greater freedom to structure their political/ economic policies, instead of following Western standards and practices.

Regional economic and security groupings will play a greater role. Apart from the ASEAN, SCO and other regional bodies could emerge as peace brokers and drivers of the 'new economy'.

It is quite evident from the study that a strategic triangle is emerging between India, China and the US. How strongly this triangle evolves would be governed by the roles played by each of the players. India needs to closely monitor security challenges that may arise from the world politics managed by the US and China. Eventually, only harmony among the three nations will ensure global peace and prosperity.

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