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CHINA – THE PHILIPPINES RELATIONS IN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE COOPERATION FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Chinese-Philippine cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is an intriguing issue because, in 2016, many people predicted that China would exclude the Philippines from the BRI framework due to their dispute over the Scarborough Shoal. Former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III had criticized China's South China Sea maritime expansion, but Duterte changed the country's foreign policy in 2016. He followed China's advice and moved forward, resolving differences between the two countries and developing a healthy bilateral relationship. This article found that the BRI framework is critical in this shift in diplomatic relations. China and the Philippines' interdependence, as well as the shift in identity from an enemy to a partner, have both contributed to the improvement of China-Philippines relations.

INTRODUCTION

During a visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed connecting the Eurasian landmass and China's maritime routes to the Mediterranean and East African Coast. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly «One Belt, One Road,» is the foundation of China's

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foreign policy. Under the BRI, a vast network of railways, roads, pipelines, and streamlined border crossings will expand westward through the mountainous former Soviet republics and southward to Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and the rest of Southeast Asia through a two-pronged plan (Liow, 2021).

Three things drive the BRI. The first is China's rivalry with the United States (US). The majority of Chinese international trade passes through the Malacca Strait off Singapore, a US ally. The initiative is key to China's efforts to create safer trade routes. China's goal is to make participating nations dependent on the Chinese economy and build economic and political influence for China. In that respect, it's similar to the Marshall Plan that followed World War II, but China funds other nations based solely on economic interests. Second, the initiative is a legacy of the 2008 financial crisis. China's government responded to the emergency with a \$4tn stimulus package, issuing contracts to build railways, bridges, and airports. Belt and Road provides a market outside China for China's state-owned companies. Finally, the Belt and Road is seen as a key part of the Chinese government's efforts to boost the central provinces' economies, which have lagged behind richer coastal areas. The government uses Belt and Road to encourage and support businesses in central regions, allocating generous budgets and encouraging businesses to compete for Belt and Road contracts (Yu Jie, 2021).

China and the Philippines established diplomatic relations on June 9, 1975. Over the last four decades, relations between China and the Philippines have been primarily warm and cordial. However, under former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III, both countries experienced fiery issues that resulted in their «cooling off» (Wong, 2014, p. 1; Dahl & Marszałek-Kawa, 2022). In comparison to its Southeast Asian neighbors, the Philippines is late to the BRI. When the BRI was announced in 2013, the Philippines and China were embroiled in a major dispute over the South China Sea (read: the Scarborough Shoal), particularly after the administration of President Benigno Aquino III filed a case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration contesting China's growing encroachments into the Philippines' exclusive economic zone and claimed territories (Baviera & Arugay, 2021, p. 277–278).



Picture 1. Map of the Scarborough Shoal

Source: Morales, 2019, p. 45.

Scarborough Shoal (see picture 1) is a ring-shaped coral reefs with several rocks encircling the lagoon. It is 124 nautical miles (N) from the Municipality of Masinloc, located within 200N of the Philippines exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and 200N Philippine continental shelf (Morales, 2019, p. 45). China refused to participate in the arbitration and has vowed to disregard the outcome. The Philippines won its case in July 2016, but by then, Rodrigo Duterte had taken office. Instead of pursuing the arbitral award to protect the Philippines' maritime rights, Duterte altered the Philippines' China policy, preferring pragmatic cooperation and accommodation with China, including participation in the BRI (Baviera & Arugay, 2021, p. 278).

This article will investigate why the China-Philippines relationship may be deteriorating. How does the Belt and Road Initiative help to improve relations between the Philippines and China? This topic is intriguing because the majority of the literature focuses on the reasons and intentions behind the initiative, as well as assessing the feasibility and prospects for

the project (Chang, 2019, p. 7), but few studies focus on how the BRI contributes to improving bilateral relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to many political scientists, international relations are characterized by the absence of control. In contrast to domestic politics, international politics is said to take place in anarchy; there is no authority or control over the actors' behavior (Gilpin, 1981, p. 27). When there is no authority to enforce agreements, any state can use force to get what it wants (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 38). Each actor seeks their own security, so they become self-interested and selfish, and they are always prepared for a war. According to Robert Gilpin, international relations are still a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy (Gilpin, 1981, p. 7).

In this situation, it is difficult to expect cooperation among actors, but the facts show otherwise. By referring to the liberal approach, cooperation between countries that always pursue their own interests can be achieved by fostering interdependence. Liberal emphasizes the role of international institutions and economic interdependence in encouraging cooperation and political (Ikenberry & Mastanduno, 2003, p. 3). Most economists and political economists believe the global economy affects international politics positively. Many argue that the global economy promotes mutual interdependence and common interests that moderate state self-interest (Gilpin & Gilpin, 2001, p. 81). In international relations, economic interdependence has two implications. First, a group of countries is interdependent if one's economic conditions depend on those of the others, such as if French inflation drives up German prices. Second, countries are interdependent if it would be costly to rupture or forego their relationship, as would be the case if links between OPEC (The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) and advanced industrial countries (who rely significantly on petroleum imports) were destroyed. The first is commonly referred to as sensitivity interdependence, while the second is commonly referred to as vulnerability interdependence (Mansfield &

Pollins, 2003, p. 11). The key distinction between sensitivity and vulnerability interdependence is the costs that countries would bear if their relationships were disrupted. Individual states have a strong incentive to reduce their own reliance on other states through policies such as trade protection and industrial policies, or to increase other states' reliance on them through policies such as foreign aid and trade concessions (Gilpin & Gilpin, 2001, p. 82).

This article assumes that China and the Philippines have a vulnerability interdependence relationship, which means that cooperation between the two can lead to conflict if China over-exploits. As a result, the concept of interdependence is insufficient to explain Xi Jinping's and Duterte's warmer ties. We need a constructivist perspective to understand it better.

Constructivism is a structural theory of the international system that claims: (1) states are the main units of analysis for international political theory; (2) the key structures in the states system are intersubjective, not material; and (3) state identities and interests are in large part constructed by these social structures, rather than given exogenously by human nature or domestic politics (Wendt, 1994, p. 385). According to Wendt, interests are dependent on identities and identities play different roles in explaining action (Wendt, 1994, p. 385).

Ted Hopf argues in *The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory* that identities are required for predictability and order in international politics and domestic society. Stable intersubjective identities are required for durable expectations between states. A world without identities is chaos, pervasive uncertainty, and more frightening than anarchy. Identities inform you who you are and who others are in a society. Identities strongly indicate a set of interests or preferences about action choices in particular domains and people. State identity involves preferences and actions. A state perceives others based on their identities while reproducing its own through social practice. The crucial observation here is that the producer of the identity is not in control of what it ultimately means to others; the intersubjective structure is the final arbiter of meaning (Hopf, 1998, p. 175).

DEFINING THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative is a Chinese infrastructure development strategy to invest in all countries and international and regional organizations (State Council of the PRC, 2015). BRI consists of a Eurasia-based Silk Road Economic Belt (the “Belt”) and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (the “Road”). According to China’s original plan, the BRI spans Asia, Europe, and Africa. The Belt aims to connect China, Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, Russia, and Europe, while the Road will link China’s coasts to Europe through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and South Pacific. After the original BRI ideals were publicized, the scheme has expanded far beyond its original core of Eurasia and the Middle East, from New Zealand to the Arctic, Africa to Latin America, and even outer space (Wang, 2019, p. 2). This novel and unique ways of collaboration (in scale, scope, structure, pattern, or content) reveals China’s goals and perseverance to accomplish its dream step by step (Chang, 2019, p. 14).

According to Alves, BRI development path has two main principles. First, it is non-conditional, pragmatic, and flexible in nature. Second, it prefers for hard infrastructure such as high-speed rail ways, dams, stadiums over soft infrastructure such as governance and rule of law (Alves, 2021, p. 82). Cheng-Chwee Kuik said that China uses BRI as a tool—and platform—to persuade and solicit closer cooperation, attract interlocking partnerships, and encourage mutually beneficial exchanges, while discouraging any action harmful to China’s interests (Kuik, 2021, p. 2).

China has identified five areas of cooperation between China and the BRI countries, including (1) policy coordination to promote government-to-government cooperation and establish intergovernmental policy exchange and communication mechanisms; (2) infrastructure connectivity, which is the BRI’s priority area, to connect the BRI countries through infrastructural building and development of common technical standards; (3) trade facilitation to remove investment and trade barriers and create a sound business environment for all BRI countries; (4) financial integration to promote financial cooperation and regulatory harmonization in the areas of currency stability, bonds, new development banks, bank lending, and payment systems; and (5) people-to-people bond to promote

exchanges between the BRI countries in culture, education, media, tourism, epidemic prevention, among others (Wang, 2019, p. 2–3). The BRI provides the opportunity to tap the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank, the China-ASEAN Interbank Association and SCO Interbank Association, including the Silk Road Fund and sovereign wealth funds, to finance the initiative's projects (Estrada, 2018).

According to Shaofeng Chen, in response to China's BRI, countries in Southeast Asia can be divided into three groups. Those strongly supporting it ("Tier 1" states), those supporting it albeit with strong reservations ("Tier 2" states), and those that strongly oppose it ("Tier 3" states). Worth noting is that there are "swing states" or states that have fallen into different tiers at different points in time (Chen, 2019, p. 36). This article supports Chen's claim that the Philippines was classified as

THE CHINA – THE PHILIPPINES MOU ON BRI

In November 2018, the Philippines and China formally signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the BRI cooperation (Paderon & Ang III, 2020, p. 35). The document states that it is only an expression of the common aspiration of both nations to cooperate on the Belt and Road Initiative for the mutual benefits and does not create legally binding obligations (Wang, 2019, p. 6). As a result, we can assert that "soft law" rather than "hard law" has vividly colored the agreement. Part 1 of the MoU states that the participants shall work together, within the framework of the Belt and Road initiative, with the strictest respect for national laws, rules, regulations and policies (The China – Philippines MoU on BRI, 2018). This MoU also lacks elaborate rules (e.g., concrete required or disfavored behavior), making it more difficult to ensure that the provisions are related to each other in a consistent manner (Wang, 2021, p. 19). Part II point 1 states that the participants will hold regular dialogues on key macroeconomic policies and development strategies, however this MoU does not specify when and how many times the regular dialogues will be held, or who will attend the regular dialogues. The MoU also has a low delegation

dimension. This is covered in Part IV of the MoU, which deals with dispute resolution. It states that any future disagreements will be resolved through diplomatic channels (The China – Philippines MoU on BRI, 2018).

Although the agreement is a soft law, it benefits both China and the Philippines. The Chinese Memorandum of Understanding with its partners, which includes the Philippines, gives the BRI international legitimacy. BRI strengthens Chinese institutions in the international order, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Confucius Institute (Wang, 2019, p. 15). This soft law agreement also gives the Philippines the option of taking pragmatic action if the two countries cannot reach an agreement. If China's funds become unavailable, the Philippines has the option to withdraw from the agreement and seek alternative funding sources, such as Japan or South Korea, to fund its infrastructure program.

HOW THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE PROMOTES SINO-PHILIPPINE COOPERATION

Prior to 2016, China had excluded the Philippines from the BRI because of the tension generated by the two countries' dispute in the South China Sea (De Castro, 2019, p. 212). Territorial disputes in the West Philippine Sea have escalated since the Philippine warship Gregorio del Pilar was involved in a standoff with two Chinese surveillance vessels off Scarborough in April 2012 and aggravated by issues of Chinese illegal occupation, unlawful establishment of infrastructures, and incidents of incursions and encroachment within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Wong, 2014, p. 1). The Spratly Islands south of the shoal are also claimed by China, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan. The chain of barren islands, reefs and coral outcrops are believed to be rich in oil and gas and the overlapping claims have long been feared as Asia's next flashpoint for armed conflict (Laude, 2012).

From 2011 to 2016, former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III challenged China's maritime claim in the South China Sea. In response to China, he shifted the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) focus from

domestic security to territorial defense, strengthened Philippine-US security relations, acquired American military equipment, and requested an explicit security guarantee from Washington under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). He also promoted a strategic partnership with Japan. The Philippines signed the 2014 EDCA (The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement) with its strategic ally, the US, in April 2014. The agreement, aimed to constrain China, allows American forces to rotate through Philippine territory. In June 2016, Rodrigo Duterte succeeded Aquino. Duterte abandoned his predecessor's foreign policy goals. He followed Chinese guidance to move forward and create a healthy bilateral relationship (De Castro, 2019, p. 206).

The Duterte administration's ambition of stronger ties with China coincided with BRI infrastructure plans. The Golden Age of Infrastructure or the "Build Build Build Program" is the Duterte administration's development and economic growth strategy of massive spending by allocating \$170 billion or 7.4% of GDP for infrastructure construction and modernization by 2022. Chinese support was important for Duterte's "Build Build Build" infrastructure program (Rabena, 2018, p. 7). The BRI is timely because the Philippines has long struggled with severe infrastructure issues that have hampered industrial and national development. In the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index, the Philippines' infrastructure (roads, railroads, ports, air transport, electricity, and telecommunications) was ranked seventh out of nine ASEAN countries (Rabena, 2018, p. 7).

In October 2016, three months into his presidency, Duterte made his first state visit to Beijing, where he reportedly obtained US\$24 billion, including \$9 billion in loans and \$15 billion in investments (Baviera & Arugay, 2021, p. 278). According to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the \$24 billion in commercial and government-to-government agreements with China are estimated to create two million jobs in the Philippines (Rabena, 2018, p. 8). In a bilateral meeting with Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano in Manila on July 25, 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Li affirmed the Philippines' participation in China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Wang Li noted that the Philippines was historically the first stop of Chinese commercial ships from

Fujian province. As such, under the BRI framework, China will help the Philippines build roads and bridges to facilitate better connectivity in the region. As a result, the Philippines became a full member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which serves as a financial conduit for China's massive infrastructure project (Paderon & Ang III, 2020, p. 39).

For China, the Philippines is vital to the Silk Road Economic Belt. The Philippines is an important nation with which it must work to gain the trust and respect of other countries in the region, especially as it demonstrates itself to be a responsible great power (Wong, 2014, p. 2). On a bilateral meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on April 2019, Xi Jinping said the Philippines is an important partner for the Belt and Road Initiative, whose objective is to build a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient trade routes (Virgil Lopez, 2019). The Belt and Road Initiative is part of China's aim to develop its poorer core regions. The government gives firms in these central regions substantial budgets and pushes them to compete for Belt and Road projects (Yu Jie, 2021). The Maritime Silk Road will connect Manila's north and south to China's Ningbo, Qingdao, and Shanghai. According to the Xinhua-Baltic International Shipping Centre Development Index Report, the route's major benefit is direct services from Qingdao to Manila and speedy service from Central China to Manila (Garriga, 2020, p. 2).

On July, 2021, China United Lines (CULines) has announced the launch of its new China – Philippines service (CPX) at Qingdao Port. The port rotation of the CPX service is Qingdao – Shanghai – Ningbo – Manila North – Manila South – Qingdao (see Picture 2). This is Qingdao Port's first China United Shipping route. The Shanghai-based shipping company stated that with the new service, it hopes to expand its Asian network and provide a new channel for foreign trade enterprises in northeast China to export to Manila (www.culines.com, 2021). The CPX service allows Shandong port and surrounding areas to export furniture, wood products, plywood, and other bulk commodities, as well as our province's abundant agricultural and sideline products, to Southeast Asia in a convenient and efficient way (www.seetao.com, 2021).

中国-菲律宾航线
China-Philippines service
CPX

Qingdao
Shanghai
Ningbo

PORT	WINDOW
青岛	FRI / SAT
上海	SUN / MON
宁波	TUE / WED
马尼拉北	SUN / MON
马尼拉南	FRI / SAT

Manila(N)
Manila(S)

CULINES
中 | 联 | 航 | 运

- 马尼拉全覆盖
- 直线快航
- 优质的港服务
- 舱位保证

Picture 2. China – Philippines Services

Source: www.culines.com, 2021.

Based on the information above, we can conclude that the BRI has an impact on China-Philippines diplomatic ties. The BRI collaboration framework requires China and the Philippines to engage in constructive engagement. However, challenges remain in the Philippines-China relationship. The Philippines and China appear to rely unequally on one another. In dealing with China, the Philippines appears to have lost sovereignty, particularly in infrastructure investment. The Philippines' vulnerability is reflected in Duterte's reaction to China's Scarborough Shoal monitoring post.

In March 2017, President Duterte said the Philippines could not stop China from building a surveillance post on Scarborough Shoal. When asked about China's environmental monitoring station on the disputed Scarborough Shoal, Duterte revealed his appeasement approach. "We can't stop China. Want me to launch war on China? I can, but we lose our military and police tomorrow." President Duterte says Chinese ships may pass or dock in the Philippines as long as they don't interfere with Coast Guard patrols (De Castro, 2019, p. 217).

Furthermore, despite the Philippines-China rapprochement since 2016, much of the money pledged by China to the Philippines has not been spent due to cancelled or postponed infrastructure projects. This could jeopardize China's relationship with the Philippines. According to Camba, \$15 billion of the \$24 billion pledged in 2016 has been modified or canceled. The remaining projects, such as rail networks and irrigation dams, have been put on hold due to the difficulty in implementing them (De Castro, 2019, p. 220). Table 1 details the completed, delayed, and ongoing projects during the Duterte administration.

Table 1. Status of Major Chinese Projects Under Duterte

Major Chinese Projects	Loan, Grant, or Investment Amounts	Opposition	Outcome
Long Haul South Rail Project/Bicol South Rail Project	\$220 million (in loans) ²⁴	Oligarchs and congresspersons	Ongoing
Safe Philippines Project (Phase 1)	\$375 million (in loans) ²⁵	A human rights group and the anti-Duterte opposition	Ongoing
Chico River Pump Irrigation Project	\$62 million (in loans) ²⁶	Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)	Ongoing ²⁷ (Almost completed as of May 2021)
Kaliwa Dam	\$211 million (in loans) ²⁸	Local NGOs	Ongoing (Making substantial progress)
Binondo-Intramuros Bridge and Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge	\$56.5 million (in grants) ²⁹	A Philippine-Chinese association, a local elite, and a neighborhood association	Ongoing ³⁰ (Almost completed as of May 2021)
Dito Telecommunity ³¹	Initially \$860 million (in Chinese FDI as part of a broader consortium) ³²	Anti-Duterte opposition	Completed

Source: Camba, 2021, p. 8.

Although very few infrastructure projects funded by China have been completed, synergies between the Belt and Road initiative and the Build, Build, Build program have been deepened, and a series of important programs are being pushed forward at a steady pace. If other projects are completed, the Philippines will be better off. The New Centennial Water

Source-Kaliwa Dam could provide at least 600 million liters of water per day for the Metro Manila which could effectively meet its water demand. The Chico River Pump Irrigation Project is expected to deliver water to 8700 hectares of rice lands and benefit 4250 farmers of 22 barangays. The Philippine National Railway's South Long Haul will largely improve transportation infrastructure which will span more than 10 cities and towns connecting Manila to South Luzon and will greatly reduce travel time between Manila and Legazpi. The Philippine-Sino Center for Agricultural Technology has built up a large-scale hybrid rice planting demonstration site of 260 hectares and provided the on-site agricultural services for over 730 farming households. So far, it has produced a total of 18,000 hectares of hybrid rice, increased the yield by 21,000 tons and brought benefits to over 9,370 households (ph.china-embassy.gov.cn, 2020).

Aside from interdependence, changes in attitudes on both the China and the Philippines sides have strengthened Sino – Philippine relations. The two state officials complimented each other and claimed to be good friends. This has a significant effect on facilitating the cooperation of the belt and road initiative. Because the perception of “friend” rather than “enemy” will strengthen the synergy between China and the Philippines in implementing the agreements signed under the BRI framework. This is consistent with Wendt's claim that interests are dependent on identities and that identities play different roles in explaining action (Wendt, 1994). This is also in line with Chang's view of China's desire to regain respectable, measurable status through the Chinese Dream and a community with a shared future. Chang argued that in order to successfully spread Chinese culture, values, systems, and experiences throughout the world, China must first overcome the current negative perceptions (Chang, 2019, p. 31).

Before leaving for China to attend The Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) annual conference 2018, Duterte stated publicly that he “needs” Beijing to support his administration's priority programs. He referred to China as an “important ingredient” in his administration's Build, Build, Build infrastructure program and the rehabilitation of Marawi City after a 5-month terrorist siege. Duterte also expressed admiration for Chinese President Xi Jinping, saying that he understands his problems and is always willing

to help. He goes on to say that he needs China “more than anyone else” (Santos, 2018). He said “I’m open for business. I’m not going to fight. We can put the war off for another 100 years. Meanwhile, I require resources for my country in order to provide comfort, educate children, and put food on the table” (Mendez, 2018).

In response to President Rodrigo Duterte’s friendly behavior, Xi Jinping also praised Duterte. Xi described Duterte as “genuine friend” and a “trusted partner” and he praised the two countries’ improved relations. Since taking office in 2016, Duterte has worked to reconcile strained ties with China in order to access China’s fund for much-needed infrastructure investment and to solidify trade deals (Virgil Lopez, 2019). According to Chinese state councilor and foreign affairs minister Wang Yi, President Rodrigo Duterte is an important ally of China and its President, Xi Jinping. He says “We’ve made so many new friends. In fact, President Duterte is President Xi Jinping’s and the Chinese people’s most trusted and important ally. Duterte always thanked China for its assistance to his administration” (Andolong, 2018). Moreover, on the 46th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and China, June 9, 2021, Xi Jinping wrote a letter to Duterte. He praised the two countries’ “everlasting friendship” and promised to strengthen the relationship between Manila and Beijing. Xi Jinping stated that the Philippines-China relationship has entered a “golden age” under their administrations (Tomacruz, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that the BRI has had a significant impact on China-Philippine relations, allowing the two state actors to reduce tensions that arose during former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III’s period. As a result, this article supports liberal scholars who argue that interdependence among actors has a significant impact on conflict reduction and regional stability. This article also supports constructivists who believe that actor identity is important in changing state behavior. Relations between China and the Philippines, which had previously been characterized by tension and conflict, have improved since Duterte’s presidency.

Under Duterte, the Philippines has established itself as a friend to China rather than an enemy.

The intense communication between Chinese and Philippine state officials, such as Presidents, Ministers, and Ambassadors, in diplomatic meetings or via phone calls, emails, and letters, also helped to build trust between the two countries. Hopf emphasizes this point in his discussion of state relations. Hopf claims that a state understands others through the identities it bestows on them, while also reproducing its own identity through daily social practice. If China and the Philippines maintain friendly relations in the future, the two countries can collaborate to manage the natural resources of the Scarborough Shoal. If this occurs, China-Philippine relations may serve as a model for other South China Sea claimant states.

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