

New Architecture of Pacific Asia in the 21st Century: Opportunities and Challenges for Mongolia and Pacific Russia

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Abstract: *The article attempts to compare the geopolitical conditions of Mongolia and Pacific Russia contemporary development considering both of them as integral parts of a common space of Northeastern Eurasia. The author highlights several fundamental trends that crucially influence the situation in the region and which, among other factors, entail the strengthening of regional multipolarity by growing the independence of individual players, including Mongolia. According to the author, Pacific Russia and Mongolia can hardly find the worthy place in American or Japanese concepts of Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Chinese “belt and road” initiative or the Russian Greater Eurasia project. Being economically less developed parts of Eurasia, Mongolia and Pacific Russia are at the same time are the most politically stable segment and promising areas of the continent for the application of financial and human capital, intellectual resources and scientific and technological achievements, self-fulfillment of people and implementation of ideas. So they have to use their advantages to meet the challenges of their development.*

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Pacific Russia¹ and Mongolia are connected not only by common border, relatively distant and close history,² but also by the present (trade and economic relations, scientific and cultural contacts, common environmental problems) and future (economic, political, security) issues and challenges. The tectonic geopolitical shifts taking place in the contemporary world will inevitably affect the vast territory of Northeast Eurasia, which, together with Manchuria of China and Inner Mongolia, includes Mongolia and Pacific Russia.

Of course, it would not be quite correct to put Pacific Russia and Mongolia side by side and compare them through the prism of geopolitics, global and regional economies. The Mongolian People's Republic is a sovereign state that independently determines its domestic and foreign policy. Pacific Russia is a part of Russian state, and the algorithm for its development is largely laid thousands of kilometers from the region, in the European part of Russia, in Moscow. There is no question of the independence of its foreign policy also: within the framework of a federal state, this policy is formed by its central authorities and, in accordance with national law, is under the full control

of the Foreign Ministry of Russian Federation.

Nevertheless, the economic and geopolitical conditions that dictate the choice to be taken among emerging alternatives and decisions are very similar in Mongolia and Pacific Russia. Fundamental differences lie in the field of decision-making and public administration. Mongolia's choice is easier in this respect: model and vectors of its development are formed in line with the realization of the country's national interests, while the Russia's national interests do not always correlate with the needs and requirements of its Asian territories. This situation is natural because while the Mongolian government correlates the country's development trends mainly with the challenges that are emerging in the Eurasian space, undoubtedly taking into account the collisions of the global world, the people who determine Russia's Pacific policy both in its external (relations with the countries of Pacific Asia) and internal (development of Pacific Russia) refractions, operate primarily in the global and Euro-Atlantic coordinate system. And even the China challenge Moscow and Ulaanbaatar interpret differently.

¹ The concept of "Pacific Russia" is quite new in the scientific and political discourse. At the beginning of the 21st century a group of Vladivostok scientists put this term into circulation, and now it is actively strengthening its positions. In fact, it is used to designate the Russian territory east of the lake Baikal to the shores of the Pacific Ocean and today geographically corresponds to the Far Eastern Federal District within the boundaries of 2019. Its uniting feature is not so much administrative borders as economic gravitation towards Pacific Asia, close involvement in economic and humanitarian processes in this region of the world. For details see: *Тихоокеанская Россия в интеграционном пространстве Северной Пацифики в начале XXI века: опыт и потенциал регионального и приграничного взаимодействия*. Владивосток: ИИАЭ ДВО РАН, 2017 [Pacific Russia in the integration space of the North Pacific at the beginning of the XXI century: experience and potential of regional and cross-border interaction]. Vladivostok: IIAE DVO RAN, 2017, p. 24-30.

² See: *Великая киданьская стена: Северо-восточный вал Чингис-хана* [The Great Wall of Khitan: North Eastern Wall of Chinggis Khan. Ed. by N.N. Kradin]. Moscow: Nauka — Vostochnaya literatura., 2019. 168 p.

Main Trends of Pacific Asia's in the Third Decade of 21st Century

At the turn of the two decades, several major and fundamental trends have emerged that are fundamentally changing the face of Pacific Asia as well as of Northeastern Eurasia.

The first of them is the formation of a new geopolitical reality there. This new reality can be viewed both through the prism of a new system of bipolarity that has already emerged in the world,³ based on the confrontation between the United States and China, and in the context of reformatting the structure of international relations within Pacific Asia itself. Both the status and role of the region in the world political and economic systems as well as the nature of intraregional ties are changing. The region is literally transforming into a fundamentally new geopolitical and economic reality, where not only China and the DPRK, but also Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asian countries are eager and trying to pursue an independent foreign policy based on the primacy of national interests. Mongolia is undoubtedly among such states. Not always and not everyone is able to achieve success, but attempts are evident. Regional multipolarity, which had previously been a distinctive feature of the region, has become markedly stronger in recent years.

Several factors and circumstances are driving these changes.

The first is the weakening of political influence and economic pressure of the “global hegemon” (USA) as well

as of ideological power of the Western world (USA and Europe). The decline of economic domination of the West and deep crisis of liberal political system became the primary reasons of these processes. Strongly Europeanized, but still Confucian-Buddhist Pacific Asia carefully analyzes and assesses the internal problems of the European Union and socio-political split happened inside American society, and the results of the analysis encourage it to be more and more distant from discredited Western civilization.

Against this backdrop, Beijing's self-awareness and self-determination as a global power is growing, and this process have generated the far-reaching effects. By 2011 China became the No. 2 power in the world economy, trade, military spending, gained solid political weight and prestige, felt its new value in the world system, and ultimately matured to comprehend the consequences of its transformation into a world power with the potential for world leadership. Not all countries, especially China's neighbors, are delighted with this transformation, but, nevertheless, China is becoming a center of gravity for many states, which in particular is demonstrated by their reaction to the Beijing's Belt and Road initiative.

As a result, a balance of power that had developed in Pacific Asia by the end of 20th century was destroyed. A certain “vacuum of power” has emerged

³ See: Дынкин А.А. Международная турбулентность и Россия [Dyunkin A.A. International turbulence and Russia]. *Proceedings of Russian Academy of Sciences*. 2020, vol. 90, no. 3, p. 216-217.

in the region, where two gravitational cores, two poles, two leaders have emerged: the old - the USA and the new/old - China. These are precisely the poles of attraction, but not the centers of power in their traditional interpretation. While Washington is gradually losing the confidence and sympathy of allies, Beijing is making good use of the tools and institutions created by Washington, urges to make the global governance system more fair and equitable, positions itself as a bastion of free trade and open market access and the great defender of intellectual property rights and the rule of law⁴ and purposefully and consistently increases its influence. As a fact, today China acts as «near-peer competitor engaged in a battle for influence vis-à-vis Washington and the West»,⁵ and in this competition, Northeastern Eurasia is far from the last place. In the latent battle between the United States and China for Eastern Eurasia, several points have emerged where the interests of the two forces are clearly defined, collide directly, and where compromises are difficult to achieve (Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea). And there are less stressful areas: education, culture, sports, etc.

The initiative in this struggle is clearly in the hands of Beijing, being in part a result of former US administration

distancing from the region. China's global ambitions, its intransigence, to some extent the fundamental issues of relations with its Asian neighbors become the impetus and symbol of these changes. The strategic aspirations and daily needs of the PRC not only dictate the logic of Beijing's behavior, but also become a reference point for other states. These states, on the one hand, intend to derive maximum benefit from the plans and projects of Chinese leadership, on the other, they naturally fear damage to their interests from Beijing's growing appetite, and thirdly, they compete with it for living space, resources and markets. It is obvious that for Mongolia and Pacific Russia, which have a long border and complex structure of relations with China, the Beijing's interests, ambitions, strategic plans and tactical decisions are not at all of idle concern.

The second trend of our time is the loss by Northeast Asia of its privileges and benefits of being a driver of the world economy. China, in fact, has lost the advantages that for three decades allowed it to be locomotive of world economic development, and today it is gradually yielding its positions to South and Southeast Asia and Africa.⁶ If you try to trace the influence of this trend on Mongolia and Pacific Russia, it turns out that at the end of the second decade of

⁴ See some Xi Jinping speeches at the international forums: Pulling Together Through Adversity and Toward a Shared Future for All. Keynote Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c_139893137.htm; 习近平主席在亚太经合组织工商领导人峰会上的主旨演讲（全文）2018-11-17 [President Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the APEC Business Leaders Summit (full text). 17 Nov. 2018]. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-11/17/c_1123728402.htm (accessed: 20.09.2021).

⁵ Cossa Ralph A. Getting China Policy Right. *PacNet* #3. **January 25, 2021**. Available at: <https://pacforum.org/publication/pacnet-3-getting-china-policy-right> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

⁶ See: Hanson, Gordon, *Who Will Fill China's Shoes? The Global Evolution of Labor-Intensive Manufacturing*. NBER Working Paper No. 28313 December 2020. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28313/w28313.pdf (accessed: 18.09.2021).

the 21st century the total value of their imports from China was less than at its beginning: in 2019, Far Eastern Federal District imported Chinese goods by 13%, and Mongolia by 25% less than in 2011.⁷ At the same time, their share in the total volume of Chinese exports decreased from 0.4% to 0.24%.

The third important trend at the beginning of the 21st century concerns the processes of regionalization. It can be defined as discrediting a geopolitical structure created and controlled by the United States and named the Asia-Pacific region. Today, political theorists and current politicians are trying to replace this virtual product of the second half of the 20th century with two new geopolitical constructs.

The United States has picked up and modernized, according to their views and interests, the idea of an even more vast and abstract region - Indo-Pacific (IPR) as the primary geo-strategic and geo-economic area of interest and responsibility, proposed earlier by Japan, India and Australia.⁸ Washington's frank intention to oppose it to China is clearly not conducive to the stable development and security of Eastern Eurasia. Earlier G. John Ikenberry aptly described the essence and content of the Asia-Pacific concept: "East Asian countries export goods to America and America exports security to the region."⁹ In the first decade

of the 2000s a number of incidents in the US and some parts of the world verified that America can no longer ensure its own security, not to mention the security of its allies in the region, and the second, that free trade rules are more beneficial to China, which began to feel itself in the Asia-Pacific space even more comfortable than the USA. As a result, a deliberate move from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" was undertaken.

China and Russia, for their part, prioritize infrastructural and economic development of the gigantic expanses of Eurasia, from Shanghai and Vladivostok to Lisbon and Amsterdam. The Chinese "Belt and Road" initiative is primarily oriented in the opposite direction from the APR (although it does not exclude the involvement and use of the region in the interests of Beijing), marking the turn of Chinese dragon's head to the west. And even the Maritime Silk Road is largely designed to provide the Chinese business with more convenient and cheaper access to the markets of Western Europe and the energy resources of the Middle East.¹⁰

Russia, from its side, although it has repeatedly declared the intentions to integrate into Asia-Pacific region, wrapped in shiny "turn to the East" packaging (and to develop the Russian Far East within this "turn"), but in reality failed this mission. Today the Russian political elite perceives the concept of

⁷ Calculated on the base of Chinese and Russian customs statistics.

⁸ See: Национальные и международные стратегии на индо-тихоокеанском пространстве: анализ и прогноз / Под ред. В.В. Михеева, В.Г. Швыдко [National and International Strategies in Indo-Pacific. Analysis and Forecast / Mikheev V., Shvydko V. ed.]. Moscow, IMEMO, 2020. 182 p.

⁹ G. John Ikenberry. American hegemony and East Asian order. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 2004, vol. 58, no. 3, p. 353.

¹⁰ 推动共建丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路的愿景与行动 [Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road]. Available at: <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=144&lib=dbref&SearchKeyword=&SearchCKeyword=&EncodingName=gb2312#> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

“Greater Eurasia” more attractive and viable than the idea of integration with the Pacific Ocean, which is far from it and where the rules of the game are set by Confucian cultures, which are, from their point of view, obscure and difficult to communicate. It is noteworthy that the idea of integrating Russia into the APR and using the Russian Far East as a corridor or bridge for this integration practically disappeared from the agenda

of the Eastern Economic Forum in 2021, while several years ago it permeated the programs of all such events.

In fact, in the promotion of these two projects, we are witnessing the reanimation of the ideas of classical geopolitics with the opposition of sea and continental spaces. And it is in these new realities that Mongolia and Pacific Russia will have to live, develop and look for their own paths to the future.

Pacific Russia and Mongolia in New Geopolitical Realities

Obviously, the designers of the Indo-Pacific version of integration do not envisage the presence of such “authoritarian revisionist powers” as China and Russia in it. In the minds of American strategists, Russia poses a threat to every participant of this “democratic association”, in particular because Russia along with China, the DPRK and “other state and non-state cyber actors» seeks to steal money, intellectual property, and other sensitive information”.¹¹ Naturally, neither the United States nor other activists in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept in any way integrate Pacific Russia into their designs.

For its part, the Russian political elite predominantly do not accept the FOIP. Minister of Foreign Affairs of the RF

Sergei Lavrov always demonstrates very negative attitude towards it, calls this idea “openly confrontational” and aimed at eroding the existing “open and inclusive cooperation mechanisms.”¹² During his trips to Asia and meetings with East Asian leaders he operates the concept of “Asia-Pacific region” and mention FOIP in negative connotations only.

The situation is different with Mongolia. Washington is extremely interested in drawing this country, sandwiched between the US two greatest rivals, into a new anti-Chinese alliance. US State Department calls Mongolia the beneficiary of new initiatives under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy,¹³ and in every possible way, emphasizes that the “[US] shared priorities with Mongolia are fully aligned

¹¹ *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*. Washington, D.C.: US State Department, 2019. P. 22. Available at: www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf. (accessed: 20.09.2021).

¹² Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Mongolia Batmunkh Battsetseg, Moscow, June 1, 2021. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/vizity-ministra/-/asset_publisher/iWCGWZXfGBWK/content/id/4759892 (accessed: 22.09.2021).

¹³ *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*. Washington, D.C.: US State Department, 2019. Available at: www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf. (accessed: 20.09.2021).

with the Administration's Indo-Pacific strategy".¹⁴ Moreover, it is natural that the main goals of Washington are extremely selfish and cynical. In accordance with the approved by the US State Department in August 2018 «Integrated Country Strategy (ICS)» for Mongolia, they include «support continued development of democratic institutions, governance capacity, and like-minded partners in Mongolia... to champion American values to create a world that supports American interests and reflects our values which make America more secure and prosperous...»¹⁵

The Mongolian leadership's positive reaction to Japan's call to join the FOIP, as agreed at the October 2020 meeting of the foreign ministers of two states, as well as Ulaanbaatar and Washington joint intention to "cooperate in promoting national security and stability across the Indo-Pacific region," the West perceived as "to be driven by continued Chinese antagonism, and a result of its "third neighbor" policy".¹⁶ However, according to experts, Mongolia's participation in the FOIP creates both new opportunities and serious challenges for it. On the one hand, FOIP strategy provides a unique opportunity for Mongolia to be a part

of the larger region. On the other hand, it increases Mongolia's vulnerability in relation to its powerful neighbors – Russia and China. Wherein, none of the FOIP-supporting countries endorse binding arrangements with Mongolia.¹⁷

As for the projects of Eurasian integration, both in the Russian and in its Chinese versions, Pacific Russia and Mongolia are presented only formally and very vaguely. Their participation is supposed to be, but nothing more. Formally, the parties even agreed to cooperate in the construction of an "economic corridor China, Mongolia, Russia", even adopted the Cooperation Program on the creation of a corridor. However, as President of the Russian Federation V. Putin noted in June 2019 at a meeting with his Chinese and Mongolian counterparts, "in the three years since the approval of the programme to create the economic corridor, there has been no implementation of any concrete project".¹⁸ Both the Chinese and Russian integration agendas are focused on Europe, Central, South and South-West Asia, virtually ignoring its biggest, richest but underdeveloped part.

¹⁴ *Integrated Country Strategy. Mongolia*. P. 2. Available at: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ICS-Mongolia_UNCLASS_508.pdf (accessed: 20.09.2021).

¹⁵ *Integrated Country Strategy. Mongolia*. P. 4.

¹⁶ Siddharth Anil Nair. Considering the Continental Dimension of the Indo-Pacific: The Mongolian Precedent. Available at: <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2021/01/22/considering-the-continental-dimension-of-the-indo-pacific-the-mongolian-precedent/> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

¹⁷ J. Mendee. The Free and Open IndoPacific Strategy and Mongolia. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Mongolia. 2020. P. 13. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mongolei/17343.pdf>. (accessed: 20.09.2021).

¹⁸ Meeting with President of China Xi Jinping and President of Mongolia Khaltmaagiin Battulga. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60753> (accessed: 22.09.2021).

In the Focus of China

At the same time, the northern and northeastern territories of China do not lose hope of being among the beneficiaries of the Belt and Road Initiative. Not only the bordering Heilongjiang Province and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, but also Liaoning province implemented in their 14th five-year plans the intention to “take an active part in the construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor.” Jilin Province plans to take part in the construction of the “Ice Silk Road.” But all these targets are more in words than in deeds.

All these plans clearly indicate that these Chinese provinces view Russia and Mongolia primarily as a raw material resource. This is not surprising. It's only logical. In 2019, the exports of Inner Mongolia to these two countries accounted about 15% of the total exports of the autonomous region, while imports from them - 67% of the total imports of foreign products (share of Mongolia

was 45, and Russia – 22%).¹⁹ In the total volume of Heilongjiang's exports, Russia accounted for 28.6%, and Mongolia - 0.6%, while imports from them (mainly from Russia) has reached almost 78% of provincial imports.²⁰

Today, Inner Mongolia intends to expand the supply of Russian gas through a branch of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline to the city of Hulunbuir, complementing the import of energy resources by attracting “outstanding talents” to the autonomous region.²¹ One would expect more specificity from the bordering Russia Hulunbuir district, but its plan is limited to a set of general phrases such as “deepening cooperation with neighboring regions of Russia and Mongolia,” “strengthening interpersonal and cultural exchanges,” and so on.²² Jilin Province, in whose economics the presence of Russia and Mongolia is barely noticeable,²³ is counting on the China-Mongolia-Russia “end-to-end transport corridor”.²⁴

¹⁹ 按主要国别(地区)分海关进出口总额(2019年) [Total Customs Imports and Exports by Main Country (Region) (2019)]. Available at: <http://tj.nmg.gov.cn/datashow/quick/QuickShowAct.htm?cn=G01&quickCode=HGND&treeCode=07022433d592449aa52244c74411e4ea> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

²⁰ 黑龙江统计年鉴2020 [Heilongjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020]. Available at: <http://tj.hlj.gov.cn/app/tongjinj/2020/zk/indexch.htm> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

²¹ 内蒙古自治区国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要 [Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development and the Outline of Long-term Goals for 2035 (In Chin.)]. Available at: http://www.nmg.gov.cn/zw/gk/zfxxgk/zfxxgkml/202102/t20210210_887052.html (accessed 01.08.2021).

²² 中共呼伦贝尔市委员会关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议 [Recommendations of the Hulunbuir Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China on formulating the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-term Goals for 2035 (In Chin.)]. Available at: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/pZNF EK4pluLoMo_Wvcus1Q? (accessed 06.08.2021).

²³ In 2019, the share of Russia in the province foreign trade accounted for 4.4%, while Mongolia is not represented in this statistics at all (吉林统计年鉴2020 [Jilin Statistical Yearbook 2020]. Available at: <http://tj.jl.gov.cn/tjsj/tjnj/2020/ml/indexc.htm> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

²⁴ 吉林省国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要 [The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of Jilin Province and the Outline of Long-term Goals for 2035]. Available at: <https://h5.drcnet.com.cn/docview.aspx?version=gov&docid=6174711&leafid=27125&chnid=3647> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

Conclusion

Thus, there is a strong feeling that both Pacific Russia and Mongolia are once again on the periphery of the Great Powers' interests. Their geopolitical importance in the region is declining, and their economic weight, as has always been the case in history, is small, whether we estimate it by the volume of their domestic market, their share in the total GDP of the region or in the foreign trade of Russia, China, the United States or Japan. But this fact does not mean that the Eurasian Economic Community and Silk Road Economic Belt initiative taken as the strategic vision of the future are alien to Mongolia and Pacific Russia. Since both Moscow and Beijing have accepted "the pairing of Eurasian Economic Community and Silk Road Economic Belt" as a guiding idea,²⁵ our task becomes absolutely pragmatic: we need to fill this idea with concrete content, specifically, organically integrate a large piece of Northeastern Eurasia into the continent's single economic and infrastructure space.

The priority for Northeast Eurasia is to drastically improve its transport infrastructure and communications system. The most obvious and understandable condition for accelerating the pace of economic development of Northeast Eurasia is to turn it into a territory favorable for the free movement of people (intellectual resources, labor

force, tourists), goods and capital. All countries in the region need this, although each in its own way.

There are a number of difficult questions to which the scientists must provide clear and unambiguous answers that people who make decisions about the future of Mongolia and Pacific Russia cannot avoid.

What is the most rational and ecologically correct way to use the main riches of Pacific Russia and Mongolia - their natural resources?

How to turn one of the main disadvantages of territories - the small size of their population, which is considered a brake on their economic development, into their advantage?

How to create comfortable conditions for people's being in these natural areas that are not too comfortable for life?

Economically less developed, Mongolia and Pacific Russia are at the same time the most politically stable parts of Eurasian continent. They are also the most promising areas of the continent for the application of financial and human capital, intellectual resources and scientific and technological achievements, self-fulfillment of people and implementation of ideas. However, the real progress can only be achieved on the basis of broad international cooperation and at an advanced technological level. This is no longer a

²⁵ Совместное заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики о сотрудничестве по сопряжению строительства Евразийского экономического союза и Экономического пояса Шелкового пути. 8 мая 2015 г. [Joint statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on cooperation in conjunction with the construction of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt. May 8, 2015]. Available at: Official website of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4971> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

matter of such a near future. And the role of science is to bring the future closer.

Naturally, Mongolia and Pacific Russia have their own path of development. But the challenges, opportunities and realities of the 21st

century, which they share, make them look more closely at each other, rely more on themselves than on outside help, and try not to miss the opportunities that bilateral cooperation gives them.

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