

*Interpreting Basic Policy Concepts Across Cultural Boundaries*

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## Introduction

This essay shall discuss the need for culture and context-aware approaches towards interpreting basic political vocabulary. It shall try to prove that our own culturally and contextually influenced perceptions of basic political vocabulary might significantly differ from any shared conceptual definitions. After explaining this metaphysical position, the article shall provide empirical evidence in differing interpretations of basic IR concept of multilateralism, as viewed by the United States and Japan. While advancing philosophical knowledge, this article bases its interest in the field of international relations.

For the most parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, international relations (IR) have been primarily a Western science. Since its inception in Aberystwyth in 1919, Western powers were the leaders in scientific agenda-setting. By approaching IR from Western background, these powers (mainly European countries and the United States) embedded their culture, ethos, philosophical foundations and language into the forming field of study. Doing so, Western powers formed the scientific discourse around their experience of political process and its interpretation.

American and European history played a significant role in this discourse formation. While majority of major agenda-setters in the discipline came from Western background, more significantly, they built their knowledge on wide foundations of Western intellectual tradition. Realist thinkers such as Edward H. Carr or Hans Morgenthau built their teaching on the legacy of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Theodore Roosevelt. Significant liberal thinkers such as Norman Angell, Alfred Zimmern, Arnold J. Toynbee or Woodrow Wilson accepted the heritage of Immanuel Kant, Thomas Paine, Adam Smith or Alexis de Tocqueville.

These forefathers of modern discipline of IR signify the influence of Western political experience. While the intellectual tradition developed from the origins of Christianity, classical philosophy, enlightenment and Latin as a common language, even the application of this metaphysical position centered on Western political experience, using terms and concepts stemming from Western philosophical discourse.

With the inception of the IR field in 20<sup>th</sup> century, aforementioned scholars followed the historical legacy of Western science by reproducing the Western political discourse. Carr, Morgenthau, Schumpeter's and others' theoretical positions reflected the European (and to some extent also American) experience, which they attributed using respective Western terms. Concepts such as "liberalism," "power," "sovereignty," "interdependence," "peace," "neutrality" (etc.) thus bear not only the meaning, that scholars attribute them, but also reflect long history of Western political experience.

French philosopher Michel Foucault drew our attention to this problem long time ago. In his essay *Discourse on Language* (1971, translation appears as an appendix to the *Archaeology of Knowledge*), Foucault pointed out how power and knowledge are intrinsically related. By giving examples of specific discourses, Foucault showed how the meaning of terms is created in relation to power. Interpreting an example of discourse on madness, he proved that the definition of what is "mad" and what is "normal" is reproduced through specialized discourse produced by scientists (psychiatrists, psychologists, etc.).

This theoretical position possesses significant implications for the field of IR. Since the discipline has been so heavily dominated by the Western intellectual tradition, the terms stemming from expert-defined specialized discourse have become political “mainstream,” coordinating relations even outside of its inception grounds (Europe and the USA). The global international system, that has been developed using insights from the discipline, has thus been created by applying terms and concepts reflecting Western experience to non-western areas (Adyanga Akena, 2012).

The multipolar world order that we have come to know and understand since the end of last century, is thus based on terms such as “democracy”, “peace” or “multilateralism”, as Western science created these terms to explain its historical experience. Similarly, adhering to these terms has become a “criteria of success,” when compliance with Western discourse is a sign of advanced and fully fledged member of international society. This Western-centered knowledge system, which reproduces itself by its sheer integrative power, is disregarding and suppressing terms coming from different discourses and guided by different values.

That being said, I believe it is becoming increasingly important to overcome this West-centric approach to IR, as it not only disregards its “others”, but also does not reflect the actual shape of international relations. Western countries (as compared to Western policy discourse) are no longer unrivaled in political and economic spheres. Countries such as Brazil, China or Japan<sup>1</sup> (and many others) have undergone a significant economic growth that has altered the existing power distribution and influential status quo.

This economic growth, however, has not been accompanied by the advancement of Non-western intellectual tradition. Prevailing Western discourse has prevented an existence of a true inter-cultural dialogue, as theories of IR and political reality are still based on terms originating in Western intellectual tradition. For instance, prevailing theoretical discourse of the field of IR still rests on three major theoretical paradigms – (neo)realism, (neo)liberalism and social constructivism (See Katzenstein – Keohane - Krasner, 1998). These three paradigms were created in Western world, explaining western history. While this fact is not necessarily signature of theoretical ignorance<sup>2</sup>, the ambition to apply one characteristic (such as realism’s unchangeable human nature of liberalism’s unchangeable normative goal) to different value-based cultures is an example of the belief of universality of science which reproduces the prevailing discourse.

### **Way out?**

The way to overcome the primacy of this discourse leads through aforementioned creation of intercultural dialogue that will help to promote the transformative potential of non-western discourse and thus overcome the ‘control of discourse’ as Foucault described it (Foucault, 1969/2002). In other words, theoretical and conceptual approaches towards the study of politics have to accept the difference posed by non-

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<sup>1</sup> Non-Western world, in this essay, represents every country and society outside Europe and its cultural enclaves in North America, Australia, New Zealand and Israel. A more complex, and also a more accurate, definition of the non-Western world would include within the non-West the unassimilated immigrant enclaves of Africans, Asians, Middle Easterners, Carribeans and Latins found within Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia etc. The division is cultural rather than geopolitical, yet for the intences of this essay, state-centric division will suffice.

<sup>2</sup> In the end, Western tools should be used to explain Western experience

western intellectual history. The author believes that there are two ways of laying this cornerstone for comprehensible and unbiased scientific approach to international relations.

First way of overcoming the cultural boundaries in the field of IR lies in introducing non-Western discourse (theories, political concepts) to Western audience. This way leads through pointing our interest into non-Western intellectual traditions originating from different values and attributing these theories and concepts into Western political discourse. The examples of this approach can be usually found outside the realm of IR, in the domain of area-studies, done by territorial experts who do not particularly work with IR concepts (See Tamamoto, 2003; Shibuichi, 2005 etc.). Nevertheless, these articles remain important for introducing the concepts (such as Chinese concept *zilu*, Cameroonian political habit of *na njangi*, Argentinean system of *cordiality* or Japanese concept of *aikokushin*) to Western world.

Theoretical approaches reaching from the field of IR have long been unaware and unwilling to accept these concepts, as IR were ruled by theoretical schools (realism) that disregarded cultural differences in favor of universally applied categories (human nature, national interest, etc.). Since the 1980's, theoretical revolution epitomized in the fourth great debate<sup>3</sup> brought ontological and epistemological advances favoring context and discourse-related research. With the end of last century, first attempts at addressing non-Western discourse appeared in IR scholarship. Puchala (1997), Bilgin (2008), Tickner and Waever (2009), Pieczara (2010), Buzan and Acharya (2007, 2010) provide recent examples of introduction of non-Western perspectives on IR.

Second way of promoting inter-cultural IR dialogue leads through interpreting Western concepts in their non-Western environment. In spite of dominant position of Western discourse in the field of IR, international system is guided by West-originated terms. Concepts and theoretical positions such as democracy, liberalism, institutions, power or anarchy, which originated in Western intellectual tradition, are used worldwide on daily basis. Yet, these terms originate in Latin-based language culture and as such have to be approached and interpreted by different languages and political practice. This transformation – or attributing meaning to foreign concepts – carries dangers of misinterpretation, not only in theory, but also in practical politics. There are several ways how to achieve this way of dialogue promotion. First lies in proper study of terms we use. Methods such as genealogy (Oguma, 2002) or contextual, historicizing analysis (Cox, 2001), which tend to approach Western terms in their respective contexts, are suitable means of addressing this problem.

Robert Cox (1986) pinpointed the significance of this approach. Influenced by Foucault, Cox described, Cox argued that all categories (terms, theories) are created to achieve a particular interest. On the basis of normative attributes, Cox illustrated this point on basic IR theories. He proved that realism (what the world looks like)

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<sup>3</sup> Fourth great debate in IR theory (sometimes also regarded as third great debate, see Lapid, 1989) is a term usually used for the theoretical spat resulting from post-positivist approaches such as post-structuralism, post-modernism, social constructivism, feminism, environmentalism etc. started questioning the prevailing positivist science in the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. These theories differed from the prevailing paradigms on both ontological and epistemological levels, criticizing the positivist-proposed unitary nature of science, existence of objective facts and thus also objective falsification process and primacy of causal research. Instead, post-positivism emphasized the need for interpretative research using methods such as discourse analysis, biography etc. See (Lapid, 1989; Smith, 2007; Drulak, 2010, s.134-143)

serves powerful countries to defend the status quo; liberalism (what the world should look like) defends economic interests of trade companies; Marxism (what the world should look like) is a tool to emancipate countries on the periphery of international society. This argument proves the aforementioned point: terms, concepts and theories, which are often passed off and understood as objective categories, are in fact always created in some context. Understanding this context is indispensable for full understanding of the term and its agenda.

This article shall try to promote this second way of dialogue-building. It will do so by analyzing the western term “multilateralism” in its Western (the United States’) and Eastern (Japan’s) respective discourses. By approaching the concept discursively, the essay aims at illustrating the “real” perceptions of the concept, which – as this article mentioned earlier – are based in their respective cultural and sociopolitical backgrounds. Since the space for a proper discourse analysis is limited, the article shall introduce the genealogy of multilateralism and its interpretation in the United States’ and Japan’s security discourse on the War on Terror in order to find answers to questions “what values are connected towards the institution of multilateralism” and “what is the ideational basis for choosing multilateralism as a foreign policy preference”

### **Genealogy of multilateralism**

In order to illustrate culturally based perceptions of multilateralism, the article will first sketch a brief historical background attributing multilateralism to Western tradition of political thinking. The origins of the word “multilateral” date more than three hundred years to the past. According to American Online Etymology Dictionary, the term “multilateral” was created around 1690 by combining the Latin words of multi (many) and lateral (lateris, side). This adjective was originally used in geometry as “having many sides” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009); first figurative use was by 1784. By 1802, “multilateral” was figuratively attributed the meaning of “pertaining to three or more countries,” transforming the word into the realm of political thinking.

Multilateralism as a political concept was created by adding the suffix –ism to the adjective “multilateral”. The oldest example of the term comes from a 1928 report in the Glasgow Herald on negotiations that led to the creation of Kellogg-Briand pact: *Mr. Briand insisted specifically on the term ‘war of aggression’ after first talking generically of all war. The reason was the transformation of bilateralism into multilateralism* (Safire 2008: 446). This linguistic inception of multilateralism then became more frequent after the Second World War with the establishment of organizations such as GATT or the United Nations; however, there were no mentions of “multilateralism” within founding treaties. In 1940, for example, magazine Economist used the term as an element of change (*This element of multilateralism will be introduced by appropriate amendments to the regulations governing each Special account* (Economist, 1940 in OED, 2009). In 1960s, multilateralism was also used as a mean of „internationalizing“ bilateral pacts – *The Germans still don't want to non-proliferate until they've been multilateralised* (Economist, 1965, p. 207). Since 1970’s, secondary multilateralism discourse was accompanied by the primary one as multilateralism became a part of official diplomatic vocabulary (i.e. there were 38 mentions of multilateralism in 1975 Helsinki final act).

Along with first uses of the term in policy practice, first efforts to theoretically and conceptually assess multilateralism also came from Western political thinking. American political theorist Robert Keohane was the first one to pinpoint the apparent lack of multilateralism's conceptual clarity and in his 1990's article "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research" opened the discussion centered on the concept. While Keohane (1990: 731) defined multilateralism as "practice of cooperation between three or more states," it was not until John Gerald Ruggie's 1992 book "Multilateralism Matters" that this definition was set into less nominal framework.

In his seminal work, Ruggie bases his definition of multilateralism on what the term is not. He argues that from the very meaning of the term, multilateralism is not unilateralism. Criteria of multilateralism are also not met by bilateralism, which does not respect its inclusive and non discriminatory principle. Ruggie (1992: 8-14) gives an example of Nazi Germany's New plan, based on multiplication of bilateral agreements, making the economic policy bilateralist in character and thus disregarding the fairness inherent to multilateral cooperation. At the same time, multilateralism is not unilateralism, as this concept tends to select participating actors for the sake of efficiency (Patrick, 2009: xiii, Pouillot, 2011: 19). As multilateralism is based on voluntary cooperation, it cannot be universalism or imperialism.

Instead, Ruggie (1992: 11) defined multilateralism as "an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct." This definition has been a starting point for all modern conceptualization efforts (See i.e. Cox (1992, 1997), Patrick, Forman (2002), Ikenberry (2003), Keohane (2006), Patrick (2009), Bouchard, Peterson (2010), Lazarou, Edwards, Hill, Smith (2010), Pouillot (2011)). It is, however, focused on the specific type of relations between the parties involved: multilateralism is based on general principles that prevent the exploitation of the weaker partner by the stronger one, which is typical of bilateralism (Baumann 2002: 3). While Ruggie points to an important consequence of multilateralism, he defines multilateralism in the terms of what it leads to instead of what it is.

The aim of this article, instead, is to understand what the involved parties mean, when they speak of what multilateralism is; i.e. not to provide a doctrine of multilateralism, but to sketch differences in interpretation, which may very well defy any shared qualitative definition. For this target, a better way of understanding multilateralism comes from the linguistic approach of James Caporaso. Caporaso (1992: 53) made a useful semantic distinction between multilateral (cooperation, action or institution) and the institution of multilateralism - an ideational concept, a metaphysical position in which the actual action or interaction is based.

As Caporaso noted, multilateralism always implies some form of cooperation. However not every cooperation is multilateral (Baumann, 2002: 3). Instead (and for the sake of this paper), multilateralism provides the basis, an underlying intention and principle for this cooperation to be multilateral. Thus, in the following, multilateral (Japanese, American) foreign policy means foreign policy cooperation (of Japan, the US) with other states, usually within the setting of an international institution. "Multilateralism" denotes a concept or intention behind such cooperation without already narrowing down, what this intention is. (See Baumann 2002) To find this

intention and values attributed to it, the paper will look into United States' and Japan's security discourse.

### **Interpreting multilateralism between USA and Japan**

As United States and Japan come from different value and language-based systems, multilateralism bears differing interpretations. In the United States, the word "multilateralism", which - as shown before - comes from Latin and has long tradition of being used in English discourse. The first American definition dates back to 1945 as an "international governance of the many". This definition was in particular opposition to bilateral and discriminatory arrangements that were believed to enhance the leverage of the powerful over the weak. Post-war multilateralism was thus closely linked to universality, which implied relatively low barriers to participation. At the same time, multilateralism dwelled on a large number of participants without the need for the patronage of a great power. Multilateralism was thus associated with another principle – the *sovereign* equality of states, which was hardly achievable in bilateral settings (See Kahler 1992).

These values attributed to multilateralism in American discourse stem from its ambiguous experience with multilateralism. While proposing multilateralism at 20<sup>th</sup> century's turning points (1919, 1945, 1989), the US has been reluctant to fully integrate itself into them. By attributing multilateralism the need for sovereignty, it predicted the ambivalent engagement with multilateralism. While proposing multilateral cooperation, the US disengaged from it when breaching the value of sovereignty.

This value of sovereignty can be found in most of United States' post-9/11 security discourse. While accepting, that terrorism has become a world-wide phenomenon, George Bush made it clear that "the US enjoy a position of unparalleled military strength," (US President's Office, 2002: 29) which is instrumental for foreign policy conduct. While accepting the need for institutionalized cooperation thus, Bush based his view on sovereignty and *action* as "history will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action" (Ibid., 1-3).

In his security strategy (US Presidents Office, 2003) Bush made it clear, that multilateralism is viable only as long as it is *effective*. Though he did not dismiss multilateralism per se, he declared that "sometimes the most difficult tasks are accomplished by the most direct means" (Ibid., p. 2) and that although "the US will always strive to enlist the support for the international community. If necessary, however, we will not hesitate to act alone" (Ibid., p.1-3). Unilateral approach is visible in all of Bush's primary discourse. In the new National Security Strategy (2006), Washington explicitly stated that "history has shown us, that when we do our part, others do theirs. America must continue to lead" (Ibid., p.2).

While Bush's foreign policy discourse is stridently unilateral, Barack Obama brought new impetus for multilateralism. Obama emphasized the "connection of the US security to the international system" (US President's Office 2008, p. 1-23) and the need for "creating stronger international institutions that will serve common interest" (US President's Office, 2010, p. 1-3). However, as proved on the Libyan revolutionary war of 2011, Obama similarly to Bush promoted effectiveness and

sovereignty even while dealing with multilateralism – “we have demonstrated what collective action can *achieve* in 21<sup>st</sup> century” (US President’s Office, 2012).

### Japan’s approach

Since the term multilateralism comes and was predominantly used in Western languages based in Latin, there is not a similar term in Japanese language. There is, however, a katakana<sup>4</sup> transgression of the English word into ‘maruchiraterarizumu’ (マルチラテラリズム), which is rarely used, since it sounds slightly snobbish because of apparent Anglicism<sup>5</sup>. Instead, the word ‘takokukanshugi’ (多国間主義) is used when speaking about what English speaking countries call multilateralism.

The word takokukanshugi, however, became widely used only after the literal transgression of maruchiraterarizumu. According to National Diet Library, which contains all books and articles published in Japan, maruchiraterarizumu was first mentioned in Japanese text in 1980, while takokukanshugi was first used in 1990. National Institute of Informatics’ web database CiNii confirms this; first scholarly use of the term takokukanshugi can be found in the article „The European Communities and GATT: Conflicts and Interactions between Regionalism and Multilateralism in International Trade“written by Watanabe Yoriyumi in 1990<sup>6</sup>.

This does not necessarily mean, that the term was never mentioned before 1990. In fact, according to National Diet Library, which also archives speeches of officials in the diet, the word takokukanshugi was first uttered on January 3rd 1988 by a trade and commerce committee meeting official stating that „as Japan does not belong to a particular free trade agreement, we must promote a new round of GATT from the viewpoint of multilateralism<sup>7</sup>.“ The word itself, therefore, might have been used in speech even before 1988, yet it was not until the end of 1980’s for it to be used regularly in political debates. Although it is almost impossible to trace the origins of the word, most probable explanation lies in transformation of the English-derived katakana word of maruchiraterarizumu into Japanese word of takokukanshugi.

The word itself is thus relatively new. The direct translation of takokukanshugi’s kanji<sup>8</sup> characters states “many-countries-between-main-cause(s)”. It is combined from two parts: ‘takokukan’ (多国間) can usually be found in dictionaries translated as „multilateral,“ yet its literal translation means „between many countries.“ ‚Shugi,‘ (主義) which literary means main cause, is usually understood as ‘doctrine’<sup>9</sup>. The whole term, therefore, can be best understood as a “doctrine-(of)-between-many-countries,” or “multilateral-doctrine.”

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<sup>4</sup> Katakana is an alphabet used to transform foreign words into Japanese language

<sup>5</sup> This is reflected for example on Google search, returning 1550 websites for ‘maruchiraterarizumu’ and 12,500 websites for ‘takokukanshugi’

<sup>6</sup> Interesting is, that in the title of this article, both maruchiraterarizumu and takokukanshugi were used with maruchiraterarizumu in brackets.

<sup>7</sup> The whole speech can be found here (in Japanese): [http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/cgi-bin/KENSAKU/swk\\_dispdoc.cgi?SESSION=3306&SAVED\\_RID=3&PAGE=0&POS=0&TOTAL=0&SRV\\_ID=6&DOC\\_ID=9542&DPAGE=2&DTOTAL=28&DPOS=28&SORT\\_DIR=1&SORT\\_TYPE=0&MODE=1&DMY=3586](http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/cgi-bin/KENSAKU/swk_dispdoc.cgi?SESSION=3306&SAVED_RID=3&PAGE=0&POS=0&TOTAL=0&SRV_ID=6&DOC_ID=9542&DPAGE=2&DTOTAL=28&DPOS=28&SORT_DIR=1&SORT_TYPE=0&MODE=1&DMY=3586)

<sup>8</sup> Kanji characters are the adopted logographic Chinese characters used in Japanese writing along with alphabets hiragana and katakana

<sup>9</sup> But can be also understood as “principle”

While in American intellectual tradition, multilateralism is attributed values such as sovereignty and universality, Japanese discourse points towards functionality. Although Japan connected multilateralism to universality by its will to embrace the role of global institutions as it places United Nations in the center of its foreign policy (MOFA, 1957), it similarly promoted functionality. Kotobank dictionary, for example, defines the term as “doctrine of *solving* trade problems between two or more countries”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officials have mentioned on many occasions that “cooperation in Asia is about cumulating functional agreements in respective fields” (MOFA, 2008).

The fact that Japan has not used any of the terms during the Cold war might stem from Japan’s dark history with multilateralism. Paris peace conference of 1919 along with Washington conference of 1921-2 were Japan’s first experiences with the term, which were later described as “diplomatic humiliations” with “lingering psychological effect” (Fukushima, 1999, p. 162). At the same time, Japan’s Cold war policy heavily depended on the bilateral alliance with the US and thus even though promoting the universality of multilateralism (by participating in global organizations), Japan always regarded the bilateral pact as “a lynchpin of Japan’s foreign policy and security, as well as a public good for the stability and prosperity of not only the Asia-Pacific region, but also of the whole international community” (MOFA 2012).

Japan thus looked for a way to balance the bilateral and multilateral policies, predominantly in a functional way. It did so by introducing a multi-layered approach that combined multilateralism and bilateralism into a dense set of functional relations (MOFA, 2007). These multilateral incentives (epitomized in Japan’s positive role in East Asia Summit, ASEAN+3 or ARF) are easily understood through the logic of functionality. Multilateralism was seen as an „addition“ towards the everpresent bilateral pact. While Japan dwelled on multilateralism promotion, comparing it towards the bilateralism created image of „anything besides bilateralism“, that „could be used to supplement it.“ (MOFA, 2010; 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The perception and the understanding of policy concepts is always based on ideational qualities of respective perceivers. That said, understanding context of the policy creation is indispensable for well informed interpretation. While globalized world seem to be using same terms and speak with similar language, meanings attributed to these terms differs from sociopolitical and cultural background to another.

The aim of this article was to argue for the need of intercultural approach to international relations and illustrate this approach on culturally defined interpretations of a basic foreign policy concept – multilateralism. In the first part, I described two ways of overcoming the dominance of Western IR discourse – by integrating non-Western discourse into Western one and by historicizing and re-interpreting Western terms in non-Western surroundings.

Discourse analysis on multilateralism proved, that a basic concept that we use on daily basis, yields variety of connected values and principles. Classical definition (Ruggie, 1993) defined multilateralism as an opposition to bilateralism, as both implied some sort of relations. Multilateralism’s political practice in security realm, however, defied these conceptual considerations. George W. Bush, positioned

multilateralism to the opposition towards unilateralism, as he attributed multilateralism values such as ineffectiveness or constrain to possibilities unilateralism would provide to the United States. Barack Obama encouraged more multilateral cooperation, yet he also approached multilateralism instrumentally, as he connected its meaning to effectiveness – whereas Bush treated it as limiting, Obama treats multilateralism as possibility.

Japan has been rather slow in accepting multilateralism into its political vocabulary. Until 1990's there were only brief mentions of the katakana translation, Japanese word of takukanshugi became widely used only after the dissolution of the bipolar system of international relations. With accepting a new word from the Western political tradition, Japan accepted some of the meaning connected to it. Similarly to the United States, Japan connects multilateralism to universality. At the same time though, Japanese discourse intertwined multilateralism with functionality, as most of the first mentions and definitions were connected to solving trade frictions between two or more countries (and thus accepting institutionalist premises of confidence building measure).

Security discourse on multilateralism continued in functional definitions of multilateralism. While perceiving bilateralism as indispensable for regional security constellation, multilateralism is seen as a logical extension to it. This approach was created during the Cold War years; however, all of this century's Prime Ministers accepted the primacy of bilateralism in security sphere. Multilateralism, thus, is understood in terms of addition, extension or complement.

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