

Opportunities and Challenges of Gulf-South Asia Relations

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Abstract: The Gulf Arab region has been always known historically for its cooperation with Western countries. Relations with Great Britain and America, which deepened through their security and economic relations, showed signs of evolving from one-sidedness to diversity after 2000. This process of diversification has gained momentum with the fact that the Gulf countries are at the intersection of the political strategies and economic interests of countries such as China and India, which are on the rise economically and politically in Asia. To better understand what opportunities and challenges this new engagement has, it is necessary to analyze the process from political economy perspective. For this very purpose, this article analyzes Gulf-South Asia relations with a historical approach with a focus on economic and political factors. At this point, it tries to illuminate the present of the process by explaining the development dynamics of the political and economic relations of the two regions. It also analyzes the current difficulties of these relations between the two regions and considers their potential course in the near future.

Keywords: Gulf Arab Countries, South Asia, Political Economy, One Road and One Belt Initiative, Economic Cooperation

Körfez-Güney Asya İlişkilerinin Fırsatları ve Zorlukları

Öz Körfez Arap bölgesi tarihsel olarak hep batılı ülkelerle işbirliğiyle tanınmıştır. Büyük Britanya ve Amerika ile güvenlik ve ekonomik ilişkileri üzerinden derinleşen ilişkiler 2000 sonrası tek yönlülükten çeşitliliğe evrilmeye başlameleri göstermiştir. Bu süreç, Körfez ülkelerinin Asya'da ekonomik ve siyasal olarak yükselişe geçen özellikle Çin ve Hindistan gibi ülkelerin siyasi stratejilerinin ve ekonomik çıkarlarının kesişim noktasında olmasıyla daha da ivme kazanmıştır. Bu sürecin sahip olduğu fırsatları ve zorlukları daha iyi anlayabilmek politik ekonomi perspektifiyle süreci analiz etmeye ihtiyaç duymaktadır. Tam da bu amaçla, bu makale Körfez-Güney Asya ilişkilerini ekonomik ve siyasal gelişmeler üzerinden ilişkisel bir yaklaşımla analiz etmektedir. Bu noktada, iki bölgenin siyasal ve ekonomik ilişkilerinin gelişim dinamiklerini açıklayarak sürecin bugününi aydınlatmaya çalışmaktadır. Ayrıca, iki bölge arasındaki bu ilişkilerin şuanda sahip olduğu zorlukları analiz ederek de yakın gelecekteki potansiyel gidişatını ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Körfez Arap Ülkeleri, Güney Asya, Politik Ekonomi, Kuşak Yol İnisiyatifi, Ekonomik İşbirliği

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Introduction

The Gulf- South Asia relations have always had a dynamic characteristic, having a powerful historical background owing to the material interest collisions between the two regions (Calabrese, 2022). This material interest merging has even realized itself during the Covid-19 pandemic in spite of its world-wide disruptive impacts since the relations between the Gulf states and the major Asian countries especially such as China, India and Japan have remained, to a large extent, intact amid the wide cuts in the global supply chains (IISS, 2021).

Following the rise of India and China as the powerhouses of the South Asia especially since the early 2000, the economic ties between the Gulf Arab states and South Asian countries have been in an increasing tendency (Jeong, 2020). However, despite the fact that economic ties would be thought as the main defining feature of such a relationship between these two regions, their primary focus of attention has been the geopolitical considerations of the countries of the regions (Sharifi, 2020). In terms of geopolitical aspects of this relation, geopolitical considerations of the both regions' states have been highly decisive in the configuration of the developing mechanisms of ties among the regions, highly impacted by the complex geopolitical context that both regions have.

Based on a closer look at the geoeconomic and geopolitical connectivities and flows between the two regions, the current dynamics of the relationship could be clearly captured. Thus, this article focuses on the geoeconomic and geopolitical connections, flows and engagements between the two regions especially since the 2010s. The combination of geopolitical and geoeconomic analyses have the credit of demonstrating the changing faces of the relationship more explicitly and concretely. In terms of methodological approach toward what defines the Gulf and South Asian "regions", this article regards a region firstly as not an enclosed and monotonous unity. Rather, it prefers

an understanding of a region through focusing on connections, flows and processes. In this regard, this article regards both the Gulf region and the South Asia through mainly their connectivities in geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects both mediated through the relations between the nation-states and societies.

This article primarily argues that the geopolitical and geoeconomic engagement between the two regions have been the case for two decades. Although the direction of the relations has been toward more engagement in terms of geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects, the faces of such aspects have been increasingly materialized through diversifying interests, including security perspectives, trade and investments agreements, labor market engagement. Although this will analyze the different faces of such deepening relations, it is sufficient enough to argue that the development in the global political economy has been effective in defining such a close partnership between the two regions whereas the strategies and policy choices of the individual states have been decisive for more connections to flourish and to take root.

Historical Context of the Engagement

The interregional relations do not have a long period of time in the modern era. The most important turning point for the interregional relations to thrive is the dramatically increasing demand for energy resources by the South Asian countries especially following the rise of China and India as the global economic powerhouses in the 1990s and 2000s (Strategic Comments, 2016). Thus, the first powerful face of a material relationship of interest between the two regions has been created through the maintenance of the energy supply and procurement (John, 2018). Furthermore, material determinations of the apparent relationship between the two regions could be detected through an analysis of the connectivities and flows between two regions such as the labor mobility and export destinations. These two flows have been intensified with the high volume of commodities

imported mostly by the Gulf countries such as luxury items as well as the investments of South Asian entrepreneurs in the free trade zones in the Gulf region (Habibi, 2011). Most recently, the accelerating race for the attraction of the foreign direct investment among the Gulf states has increased and had the potential to more increase the degree of connections of two regions through investment interests (Keshavarzian, 2010). Historically, although commodity and investments flows have been mostly one-dimensional from the South Asia towards the Gulf region, the recent interest of the Gulf countries for having economic partnerships and investments in the South Asian territory have suggested the likelihood of the bilateral dimension of the flows from the both sides.

In addition to the economic connections and flux, two regions have strongly engaged in geopolitical and strategic activities as well. This could be seen in different scales such as state-to-state relations and global public opinion. In this regard, the attempt of some Gulf countries in order to play a powerbroker role for the geopolitical tensions between the states in the South Asia has been a powerful sign of the priority given to the relations between the two regions among the eye of the decision makers of the regions (Sharifi, 2020). In addition to that, the attempts of regions' countries for supporting each other in international settings have been a clear demonstration of the increasing common sense of geopolitical interests among the countries of the regions despite the fact that this has been realized through mostly state-to-state level.

It is the case that the increased connectivity and flows have intensified the interdependence between two regions. Although the increased connectivities in terms of economic and political aspects have benefited to the both sides on the one hand, the intensified interdependence of two regions has also the likelihood of causing negative outcomes for the parties (Samaan, 2014). Thus, the intensifying relations between two regions do not negate the challenges that the policy implementations in one region negatively

affects the other one. In this regard, the Vision strategies of the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman, have caused a tightening of the employment opportunities for the expatriates from the South Asia. The most important outcome of such a change in the policy implementation in the Gulf states is the drying up the remittance flows (Samonova, 2019). Remittance flows have been an important political economic reality of the South Asian societies and states since they have been an important factor to increase the social welfare in the South Asian societies (India Migration Now, 2019). Alongside the loss in social welfare caused by the decreasing opportunities of remittance flows from the Gulf countries, such a dramatic shift in the long-established mechanisms of the labor market might have several other negative consequences for states and societies in the South Asia (Calabrese, 2022).

Geopolitical Aspect of the Relationship

The post-9/11 period has opened a new strategic relationship between the Gulf and South Asian states (Buzan, 2011). The response of the Gulf states for the increased tension between the USA and the Gulf states has been the strategic decision to diversify their foreign policy engagements towards more inclination with Russia and Asian states (ECFR, 2019). This diversification attempt has been mostly symbolized with the visit of the Saudi King Abdullah to China in January, 2006. This was seen as a part of the “Look East” policy strategy of the new King for the purpose of achieving more diversification of its geopolitical and geoeconomic engagements since the security paradigm of the Gulf countries has been dependent upon the Western alliance for decades (Burton, 2020). High dependence of the Gulf Arab states on the US security umbrella has been felt as causing new uncertainties for the regime survival and regime security of the dynasties of the Gulf region.

Currently, geopolitical competition on the Indo-Pacific mainly between the China and the USA has several repercussions in the Gulf-

Asia relations. However, it is important to emphasize here that the Gulf states mainly prefer not to make a choice between the two powerholders such as the USA or China (Jeong, 2022). Their primary concern in this regard is the future obligation on them to make such a choice. Rather, they prefer not to get involved in the sphere of influence of just one side, as materialized in the balance policy of these states. Furthermore, the primary policy of the Gulf Arab states regarding the issues and tensions within the South Asian region has been to decouple the geopolitical and geoeconomic relations with one specific country. In this regard, since the Gulf countries want achieving close relations with both sides in the fight, they do not want to take position on who is the rightful in the specific issue of conflict. However, it is not always easy not to get involved and not to take positions between two sides since competing individual states would want at least a diplomatic support, if not a material backing.

Historically, one important geopolitical issue creating closer ties between the two regions has been the provision of energy security for both sides. The increasing demand for energy resources by the South Asian countries has also intensified the depth and extent of relations between the two regions (Lee, 2005). As examples for the several repercussions of energy security concerns, these two regions have developed increasing relationships and engagements in defense, counterterrorism, maritime and naval cooperation (IISS, 2021). Strategic Partnership Agreement has been the institutionalization of the security relations between the two countries (Mogielnicki, 2019). For example, Saudi Arabia and UAE have signed agreements with India in order to improve and cooperate the security issues. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has launched a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China in order to enhance military relations despite the Chinese limited capacity to supply the armament that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is in need of. However, the increasing ties in terms of cybersecurity cooperation between the two regions have been highly important since the South Asian states especially China have

the qualified cybersecurity technology which the monarchical regimes in the Gulf countries are in need of in order to achieve their regime survival (Burton, 2020).

The Gulf states have been increasingly involved in the tension between the Asian countries such as the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have been effective in order to reach a peace resolution between the two states during the conflict in 2001 and 2002 (Mogielnicki, 2021). This involvement has been a sign of the priority given to the regions' stability by the eyes of the decision makers in the Gulf Arab states (Ulrichsen, 2021). Also, with their endeavor for easing the tensions started January 2019 between India and Pakistan, diplomats from Saudi Arabia and the UAE -under the leadership of Mohammad bin Salman, the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Mohammad bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates- have been praised by the Pakistani officials as well as the US officials (Mogielnicki, 2019).

Understanding the geopolitical rapprochement between the two regions also requires analyzing the existent cracks and tensions within each regional area. For example, the rapprochement of the UAE and Saudi Arabia with India could not be thought without having a closer eye on the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. While approaching toward India, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia also have to create a balance between India and Pakistan so that such a rapprochement does not lead Pakistan to be impulsed by the security threat, and thus; in return, does not cause an irreparable damage to the historic relationship of Pakistan with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, in order to better understand the geopolitical engagement, it is crucial to have a look at the enthusiasm and priority that countries of the regions allocate to mutual relations. This also shows the distinctiveness of the nation-states of the regions. For example, while the UAE is ahead of the geopolitical engagement with its strategic partnership agreement with China and India, and being

the top trading partner with those countries caused by the dramatic development of its re-exportation activities, Kuwait is seen as lagged behind considerably. Also, Saudi Arabia could be seen as an important partner by the South Asian states since it has been dramatically expanding its fields and scope of engagement with the South Asian countries (IISS, 2021).

Economic Aspect of the Relationship

Although post-2011 period has shown an increase in the security cooperation between the two regions, the last two decades have been a showcase for increasing the economic linkages and interest for the two regions. Economic linkages between the two regions have suggested being premature because of the deficiencies in the exchange mechanisms such as regulations, red tapes and challenging aspects of business environment since GCC states do not have a free trade agreement with India although the region has signed free trade agreements with the European Free Trade Association and Singapore (Al Fazari & Tang, 2019). However, these challenges have not prevented the large developments forward to deeper connectivity and engagement between the two regions' countries in terms of economic aspect.

This engagement has had the potential to get closer because of the connection creating forces of the China's One Belt and One Road Initiative between the two regions. This initiative has been seen as the major testing ground for the future trajectory of the two regions since its potential rivalry and tensions creating impulses and forces owing to the economic competition and power politics have potentials to cause deep historic enmities between the neighboring or competing countries as well as its cooperation generation opportunities (Liefu, 2020). This is what the future history will show since it will be the complex sets of relationships between multiscalar forces and actors over and within the perceived and defined structures of power and existence. However, in this section, this article will focus on capturing

the material determinations of the connectivities and flows between the two region such as energy stakes, labor issues, trade relations, investment opportunities, and economic aid.

Energy Stakes

Crude oil supply of the GCC towards the South Asia has been decisive in the interaction of the two regions. Asian countries, including China, Japan, India, South Korea and Singapore, have been highly dependent upon the Gulf countries since around 60% of its crude oil comes from those countries. This percentage even reaches to around 90 percent for the case of Japan (Niblock & Malik, 2013). In addition to the high importance of the energy supply from the Gulf countries to the South Asia, GCC states have been launching several strategies in order go beyond the export of crude oil to the South Asia and to diversify its export bases towards these countries. They have the vision of diversifying the downstream activities and facilities regarding the natural resources in the South Asia (Mogielnicki, 2019). They have attempted to invest in refineries, petrochemical complexes and storage facilities. In this regard, the high stakes of the energy cooperation have also intensified the common geopolitical considerations of the two regions.

Labor Issues

Long-established spatial fix in the GCC economies through the cheap labor force coming from the South East has been crucial for the economy of the both regions. Gulf employers have long been dependent upon the flow of cheap labor force from the South Asian countries since it is comparatively more practical to resort to this cheap labor force instead of inefficient and non-motivated domestic labor force. Also, cheap labor force has been highly important for the Gulf countries to achieve a stable inflation rate owing to the low costs of labor. Low-skilled workers from the South Asian countries have long provided comparative advantage for the Saudi companies owing to the low costs of labor (Shayah & Sun, 2019).

Such a long-established spatial fix has been not only helpful for the Gulf Arab states, but also it has been highly important for the South Asian states and economies. This is because it has given them the opportunity to push the unemployment and social welfare crises to other times and places. While the Gulf Arab states have found solutions for their lack of low-skilled and middle-skilled labor force, the South Asian states have sent their high reserves of human labor to the Gulf Arab states, which in turn partially generates solutions for the lack of social welfare institutions and implementations in these countries (Medium, 2019; Abdul-Aziz, Olanrewaju, Ahmed, 2018). Thus, these two regions have been highly key to each other for a long period of time in terms of regime survival and social welfare. However, labor nationalization attempts in the Gulf states have started changing labor market dynamics between these two regions since the early 2000s despite the fact that for the time being the percentage of the expatriate population working in the Gulf region make up around the half of the Gulf labor force.

For the last decade, the Gulf states have launched several nationalization programs in the labor force such as Omanization and Saudization. In this regard, several policy implementations have been launched in order to restrict the expatriates preferring to the Gulf states for their working destinations (John, 2018). Main objective of these policy strategies and implementations has been making the Gulf states a less attractive working place for the potential oncoming expatriates such as pressures over the expatriates through issuing and increasing the monthly fees of the expatriates and increases in fees for visas, and also restricting the time period for visas (Mogielnicki, 2021).

Trade Relations

Import-export destinations and flows have been important signs demonstrating the power of economic connectivity and engagement between the two regions. Looking at the historical development of such connectivity and engagement have several points to demonstrate

us the increasing tendency of flows in terms of trade relations between the two regions (Habibi, 2011; Strategic Comments, 2016; Burton, 2020). Economic connectivity could be seen by following the flows of international flights between the two regions. For example, almost one-third of international flights taking off from the India arrive to an Emirate airport while almost again one-third of international flights from the UAE reach to an Indian airport.

Especially, the increase in the trade volume between the UAE on the one hand and India and China on the other hand is highly important to understand the current tendencies of the trade relations between the region. The volume of re-export activities of the commodities coming from mainly India and China to the UAE has been an important part of the institutionalization of the relations. Thus, the deepening of the relations has its roots in the increase and deepening of the economic activities between the region. Increasing infrastructural investments for the ports and free trade zones in the both regions has helped facilitating the deepening of the relations. Ports such as Jebel Ali and Mina Zayed not only have connected the GCC region to the South Asia but also have connected the South Asian countries and commodities to the Europe and the Western hemisphere. In this regard, currently Gwadar Port in Pakistan has highly impacted the relations of the countries between the two regions owing to the highly geostrategic location of the port and the investment opportunities that it provides.

Investment Opportunities

Until the early 2000, the investment routes between the two regions have been mainly one-directional, that is, from the South Asian countries towards the Gulf region (Jeong, 2020; Samaan, 2014; Liefu, 2020). However, Gulf countries' new policies of shifting their eyes towards the east as materialized in the King Abdulah's vision to China with the title of "Look Eastward" and defined by some as the Gulf's "eastward shift 2.0" has opened new pages for the relations of the two regions (Al-Adwani, 2020). The early 2010s have shown the new

openings of the Gulf states through their Vision strategies towards more deeper relations and cooperation with the South Asian countries. As a follower of the idea of look eastward, the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has visited to the South Asian countries in 2019, ending with several investment pledges in the South Asia. Gulf states have seen opportunities with being an active part of the China's One Belt and One Road initiative. In this regard, the United Arab Emirates and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have launched several investment plans along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor from Chinese border to the Gwadar Port. For example, the UAE firms such as DP World have been highly enthusiastic in order to get contracts for the infrastructural projects pledged by China. Those contracts and projects have also created several connectivities between the two regions, ranging from national level and trans-societal level (Mogielnicki, 2019).

On the other side of the investment equation, South Asian countries have been keen to make investments in the Gulf countries and to take advantage of several opportunities and free trade zones that the Gulf states provide for the foreign investors and entrepreneurs. For example, China-supported Infrastructure projects such as YASREF (Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refining Company), Jeddah-Mecca-Medina Railway, King Salman International Complex for Maritime Industries and Services in Ras Al Khair have demonstrated the materialization of enthusiasm of the South Asian countries for investments.

Challenges of the Engagement

This article has shown the increasing and deepening relations and connections between the countries of the two regions. The relations between the two regions have been seen as doomed to deepen and get more closer to each other in order to the plans and projects of the states on the both sides and general tendencies of the global economy politics. However, an estimation over the future projections of the

relations and engagement of the two regions has to take the potential challenges these relations have to cope with into consideration.

Political Challenges

The nature of the statesmanship of the states in the both regions has authoritarian tendencies. The Gulf states have been ruled by monarchies from the beginning of their state-building. Thus, the authoritarian tendencies of the regimes create uncertainties for the maintenance of the powerful relations in the future projections. This is mainly because the deepening of the relationship has been highly impacted by the decisive strategies and activities of the authoritarian regimes and monarchies (Samaan, 2014).

The other factor that has the potential to affect this process and engagement is the rivalry between the Gulf countries on the one hand and South Asian countries on the other hand. Maintenance of the economic relations has been highly dependent upon the powerful political certainties since the rational investment decisions have to take the potential risks preventing the profit in the near and long-term into consideration. On the South Asian part, Potential antagonisms such as Pakistan since the tension between Pakistan and India has been shaping the relationship very deeply. Also, the South Asian states have several border disputes which have the potential to negatively affect the trade routes and trade flows such as the dispute over the Jammu and Kashmir region and the Durand Line dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan. On the GCC side, eruptions of the disputes between intra-GCC states such as the Qatar Blockade in 2014 and 2014 by other GCC states and the long-term rivalry between the Gulf states such as the rivalry between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other hand following the Arab Spring movements and also the current competition between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in order to take the lead of the region and to attract more investors.

Furthermore, competition in the Indo-Pacific between China and the USA has had the important potential to negatively affect the relation

between the two regions (Samaan, 2014; ECFR, 2019). This is because the competition has an impact on the trade routes and geopolitical choices of the individual states. Reflections of this competition on the individual states have the potential cut the deepening tendencies of the engagement towards more isolationism. However, for the time being, it is a fact that individual countries have not been seen as impacted by the Sino-US competition to a great extent. Diversification policies of the Gulf states for their security partnership from being only dependent upon the Western states towards including the security umbrella of the Eastern powerholders have been highly risky policy making requiring an extensive endeavor to make a clear balance and not to provoke the Western powerholders to the point that the regime survival of the Gulf monarchies have been shaken off.

Economic Challenges

In addition to the negative impacts of the national, regional and global geopolitical competition and rivalry on the connectivity and engagement of the two regions, there are other economic realities and challenges that the regions have to deal with. Although the both sides have been considered highly keen and enthusiastic about making investment on other states and attracting investors from other countries, both the Gulf rulers and the South Asian rulers have to avoid making their domestic alliances angry at them by favoring the foreign investors in the contracts and projects with the purpose of the maintenance of the deepening economic and political engagement. Thus, the entrepreneurs from the Gulf countries have to compete with the domestic companies in the South since the local opposition to commercial projects have been influential for the trajectory of the investment project allocations. For example, local opposition in India has achieved to have the project of the \$44 billion mega-refinery in Maharashtra with ADNOC (Abu Dhabi National Oil Company from the UAE) and Saudi Aramco as the strategic project partners postponed.

It is the case that the increased connectivity and flows have intensified the interdependence between two regions. Although the increased connectivities in terms of economic and political aspects have benefited to the both sides on the one hand, the intensified interdependence of two regions has also the likelihood of causing negative outcomes for the parties. Thus, the intensifying relations between two regions do not negate the challenges that the policy implementations in one region negatively affects the other one. In this regard, the Vision strategies of the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman, have caused a tightening of the employment opportunities for the expatriates from the South Asia (Chowdhury, 2018). The most important outcome of such a change in the policy implementation in the Gulf states is the drying up the remittance flows. Remittance flows have been an important political economic reality of the South Asian societies and states since they have been an important factor to increase the social welfare in the South Asian societies. Alongside the loss in social welfare caused by the decreasing opportunities of remittance flows from the Gulf countries, such a dramatic shift in the long-established mechanisms of the labor market might have several other negative culminations for states and societies in the South Asia (Shayah & Sun, 2018; Niblock & Malik, 2013).

Furthermore, although some experts have argued that the two regions have had cooperation opportunities arising from the energy transition issues and green energy investments, such a cooperation has been highly concerning for the oil and natural gas exporters of the Gulf region. This has been mainly because India and China have been the forerunners of the transition to green energy, electric cars and renewable energy resources. This means a loss in demand for the Gulf countries in the middle and long-term. It has been argued that the pressure of the long-term decrease in demand for the hydrocarbon energy resources has been highly influential for the Gulf states in order to launch and implement the long-term Vision strategies,

including an economic diversification program as their primary concerns.

Conclusion

Based on a closer look at the geoeconomic and geopolitical connectivities and flows between The Gulf countries and The South Asian countries, this article has argued that the current dynamics of the relationship could be clearly captured. Thus, this article has focused on the geoeconomic and geopolitical connections, flows and engagements between the two regions especially since the 2010s. Also, this article has both analyzed the Gulf region and the South Asia through mainly their connectivities in geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects mediated through the relations between the nation-states and societies.

The article has primarily argued that the geopolitical and geoeconomic engagement between the two regions have been the case for two decades. Although the direction of the relations has been toward more engagement in terms of geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects, the faces of such aspects have been increasingly materialized through a diversifying interest, including security perspectives, trade and investments agreements, labor market engagement. Although the article has widely analyzed the different faces of such a deepening relation, it is necessary also to argue that the development in the global political economy has been effective in defining such a close partnership between the two regions whereas the strategies and policy choices of the individual states have been decisive for more connections to flourish and to take root.

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