

Event Report

**Four Years of the Belt and Road Initiative:
Perspective from Europe**

EIAS Briefing Seminar

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China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been received with great interest ever since its launch in 2013. The project is to better connect the Eurasian continent through the development of infrastructure and energy projects. It is to become an inclusive initiative to the benefit of all along the Belt and Road. Now, a number of years running, the BRI is taking shape and an increasing number of projects are being implemented. Governments of host countries and international organisations seem to agree on the relevance of such a grand initiative. Given the huge gap of infrastructure investment in developing areas, it is very much timely, and it comes as no surprise that many governments are welcoming China's investments. Paradoxically, however, running almost parallel to increased Chinese investments is an increase of Sinophobia and public discontent in host countries. A large majority seems to agree on the necessity of investment, yet the means by which China enters host countries seems to strengthen a sense of distrust and even protectionism.

This seminar discussed the state of play of China's Belt and Road Initiative, including an assessment of the reasons behind the paradoxical public discontent towards Chinese investments in host countries, and means to strengthen people-to-people exchanges, R&D cooperation and other soft areas of cooperation (culture, education, etc.). For this occasion, the European Institute for Asian Studies presented the outcomes of its policy paper *OBOR and China-EU Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges for Europe*.

Opening remarks by Mr Axel Goethals, CEO, EIAS

Mr Axel Goethals began by outlining what the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) entailed. Fundamentally, the BRI is comprised out of land-based and maritime trade routes. Mr Goethals emphasised the massive potential of the BRI, as it sets out to connect 65 countries - encompassing 4.4 billion people - through "market integration, regional cooperation, policy coordination, and people-to-people (P2P) exchanges". Mr Goethals stressed that the BRI aims to be as inclusive as possible. At its heart, the BRI endeavours to close infrastructure and connectivity gaps across Eurasia. China hopes that this endeavour will further open trade flows and promote openness across the world.

China has already pledged huge investments to lay the foundations for the BRI. Their own financial pledges, as Mr Goethals pointed out, are a clear indication of their dedication to the initiative. Aside from pledging large amounts of investment, China has also established institutions to financially back the BRI. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund are two notable examples of this. Mr Goethals sees China's actions with the BRI as its willingness to contribute responsibly to the "greater objectives for global development".

However, Mr Goethals also underlined that such an ambitious project does not come without its challenges. Most of these challenges revolve around misconceptions in how China is perceived. Host countries of current - and future - BRI projects have seen a rise in Sinophobia, coupled with "general public discontent". To tackle this, the BRI must come hand in hand with effective public diplomacy that tries to address the reservations of local communities.

Mr Goethals explained that this EIAS seminar sought to address some of the misconceptions of the BRI in Europe, as he believes that too often, Europe looks at China through an out-dated lens. Such a way of perceiving China does not allow the EU to appreciate the rapid pace at which China is changing.

Keynote Presentations

H.E. Mr Kris Peeters, Deputy Prime Minister, Government of Belgium

His Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Kris Peeters started by addressing the potential he sees in the BRI. He stated that four months prior he represented Belgium at the BRI forum in Beijing and was intrigued by its potential benefits for Europe and the world. In his eyes, the BRI could provide a massive boost to the world economy and thereby, spur on economic growth. Additionally, it could also bring stability to the world's most turbulent regions by laying solid economic foundations, from which prosperity could. At a time when the EU is facing the largest refugee crisis in its existence, stabilising volatile regions will target the issue at its root. Mr Peeters stressed that he was extremely impressed by President Xi Jinping's pledge of USD 124 billion to the BRI. The main areas the BRI will focus on are: transport, telecommunication, financial services, and the energy sector.

Mr Peeters said that he sees large potential gains in Belgium's involvement in the BRI. As one of the most important logistics hubs in the world, Belgium has the potential to further develop its logistical capacities by taking on BRI investments that will allow it to develop ports, railways, and airports. He points out that Belgium is already actively pursuing airline connections with China, which is reflected in the fact that the first direct flight between Brussels and Shanghai will be operational in October 2017.

Mr Peeters highlighted that the BRI can give a boost to the whole of the EU as well. Investment in infrastructure can benefit the entire continent and European businesses can prosper further if they operate with the BRI. Moreover, certain European-level projects offer the potential of increased cooperation with the BRI, such as the Trans-European Networks (TEN). The EU and China are also currently negotiating an investment agreement, which is meant to create a favourable business environment between the two markets.

Mr Peeters stressed that the EU taking on a leading role in the BRI is of paramount importance, so that it could help steer projects onto a course, which respects international rules. The notion that Europe could hide behind walls was an "illusion". The EU and its member states need to take on a proactive role in the AIIB, if they are going to have any influence on how the BRI pans out. Furthermore, Mr Peeters emphasised that China and the World need the EU to be on board in order for the BRI to prove successful. The BRI has the potential to deepen economic connections between the world's two largest markets, so without the EU, the BRI cannot achieve its full potential. Mr Peeters states that the BRI "begins in China, but it ends in Europe".

Close cooperation on the BRI between China and the EU can help standardise the rules and regulations by which BRI projects have to abide. Such cooperation can ensure maximum transparency and openness, which are essential to achieving prosperity. Additionally, the BRI should be fair and equally beneficial to all parties involved. Mr Peeters outlined that the EU can help make the BRI an open and transparent platform, which helps facilitate business. Furthermore, the EU can also export its own social and labour standards to other BRI countries. In Mr Peeters' view, the EU must facilitate unhindered trade flows, but emphasise that these need to be sustainable and in line with the UN 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development. To aid in this, Mr Peeters acknowledged certain areas, which needed improvement, most notably, the cohesion of administrative and regulatory barriers, and clarifying customs procedures.

Mr Peeters concluded that the BRI is the largest infrastructure investment programme that the world has ever seen and as such, the EU needs to be a part of it. In order for this to be as effective as possible, the EU needs to speak with one united voice, not 27 divided ones.

H.E. Mr Mu Yongpeng, Counsellor, Political Department, Mission of the People's Republic of China to the EU

H.E. Mr Mu Yongpeng highlighted that the BRI does not end anywhere; rather he defined it as an "open system".

Mr Mu outlined that since its announcement in 2013, the BRI is slowly taking shape. Over 100 countries and international organisations have expressed support for the project. China has also signed cooperation agreements with 40 countries and established cooperation frameworks with over 30 countries. Alongside this, multidimensional infrastructure networks are being developed over land, sea, and air.

In terms of trade and investment the BRI has proven itself to be ambitious. Thus far, China's trade with BRI countries has amounted to USD 3 trillion, whilst it has invested over USD 50 billion in these countries since the initiative's inception. Additionally, Mr Mu added that Chinese companies have set up 56 economic cooperation zones in 20 different countries. Overall, projects have created USD 1.1 billion in tax revenue and 180,000 jobs. The AIIB has already provided USD 1.7 billion in investments and the Silk Road Fund has invested USD 4 billion into projects.

Mr Mu called for greater EU China cooperation to further develop the BRI. He stressed that when it comes to trade and open markets, the EU and China share common values. In his opinion, the

EU and China need to encourage international connectivity, help guide policy coordination and strategy guidelines, and to synergise investments through an investment platform.

Mr Mu also emphasised China's growing cooperation with individual EU member states. It has signed numerous intergovernmental agreements with member states and it has institutionalised its cooperation with Central and Eastern European (CEE) states through the 16+1 platform. The 16+1 financial holding company has been established to help finance BRI projects with CEE partners. To bolster business for both markets, both China and the EU signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to create a connectivity platform between them.

Mr Mu was also pleased to express future plans to deepen People-to-People (P2P) exchanges for professor and students, but also to enhance connections between academics, think tanks, and journalists across the BRI. Mr Mu reiterated that the China-EU cooperation was essential to promote connectivity across the BRI and to ensure its continued progress and development.

The EU and China have started to work together on 5G, which will prove highly valuable in the future with current trends of digitalisation. China and the EU collectively have 1.1 billion Internet users, who could benefit from improved 5G infrastructure networks. To that end Mr Mu stated that China and the EU are "joining hands and deepening dialogues".

The EU and China have also experienced increased financial integration in Mr Mu's eyes. China and the EU have set up the joint China EU Silk Fund to coordinate investments together. The European Commission (EC) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) have played important roles in facilitating this cooperation. China has become the 67th shareholder in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), with which it can also potentially coordinate BRI projects. The EU and its member states have also become increasingly involved in the AIIB: 14 out of the 52 AIIB members are EU member states.

When looking back on the BRI so far, Mr Mu has made three observations. Firstly, the BRI is guided by a spirit of openness and constructive cooperation, which seeks to counter protectionism and anti-globalism. To Mr Mu's mind, the EU and China need to remain committed to transparency and a fair global trading regime. Secondly, the inclusive nature of the BRI makes it a "win-win" for partners that are involved in the project. Thirdly, the EU and China need to capitalise on this moment to enhance their cooperation. Mr Mu wishes to see that cooperation expand to a China-EU legal dialogue and a China-EU migration dialogue, the latter to facilitate growing connections between the peoples of Europe and China.

Mr Mu rounded off his keynote speech by emphasising the importance of SMEs as the driving force behind BRI projects. He also stressed that the BRI would help maintain world peace and that the EU and China should stand shoulder-to-shoulder in achieving this goal.

Presentation

Mr Hannes Dekeyser, Programme Coordinator, EIAS

Mr Hannes Dekeyser presented the preliminary results of EIAS' research paper, focused on the achievements of the BRI to date, as well as the opportunities and challenges it presents for the future. The general aims of the BRI are: improving policy coordination; connecting facilities through infrastructure; facilitating trade; deepening financial integration; and fostering People-to-People (P2P) exchanges. These aims are to be materialised through six different economic

corridors, which will connect over 60 countries that account for 40 percent of global GDP. The main sectors that it seeks to target are: energy, transport, and IT - to develop a digital silk road.

All of this is highly ambitious, though also vague. Consequently, Mr Dekeyser stated that when it was initially announced, the BRI's reception was relatively "lukewarm" in Brussels. However, momentum has been growing within the EU to partake in the BRI as its benefits are slowly taking root. EU member states' willingness to become part of the AIIB is testament to this.

Mr Dekeyser went on to illustrate the "practical outcomes" of the BRI so far in Europe: the first railway line connecting Yiwu (in Eastern China) to London has been constructed; a high-speed railway between Belgrade and Budapest is currently being constructed; and China Cosco Shipping has invested heavily into Greece's Piraeus port. This is indicative of how Chinese investment is increasing in Europe, according to Mr Dekeyser.

Following this, Mr Dekeyser focused on the political outcomes of the BRI in Europe, which "are not very tangible". One such political outcome is the EU connectivity programme. Alongside this, the EU and China are exploring the possibilities of synergy programmes across the BRI, the Trans-European Networks system, and also - importantly - the potential synergies between the Juncker Plan and the BRI. The fact that China has become a member of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has aided in this process. Mr Dekeyser also stressed that the EIB has "expressed interest" in working with the AIIB. Moreover, China already has close links to Central and Eastern European countries through the 16+1 platform.

Mr Dekeyser emphasised that the economic dimension of the BRI provides the EU with many possibilities, such as with trade, which can be hugely beneficial to European companies. Increased investments to improve infrastructure will smoothen trade flows, thereby further facilitating trade. Amongst other things, the EU and China can cooperate to simplify customs cooperation through cross-border e-commerce, IT cooperation, financial cooperation, and the synchronisation of supply chains.

Chinese investments in themselves also provide opportunities. They have the potential to save jobs; increase tax revenues; bridge the existing infrastructure gap in Europe; and more importantly - they can provide easier access to the Chinese market. The EU and China can thereby also increase their international security cooperation.

Mr Dekeyser then outlined the BRI's current agenda for Europe. Fundamentally, it seeks to deepen coordination between China and the EU in the realms of global governance; as well as fostering closer P2P interactions - for example, through a university alliance across the BRI. The P2P interactions have the potential to be further embraced with the China-EU year of tourism in 2018. Moreover, the BRI's aim to establish a digital silk road can potentially work alongside the EU's digital single market.

Mr Dekeyser then addressed the numerous challenges that face the BRI, starting with its practical and technical challenges. Mr Dekeyser emphasised that the BRI is "a long-term concept [...], a vision" that aims to be as flexible as possible. Subsequently, it is inherently vague.

Furthermore, the EU and China make use of different financing models: the EU, as Mr Dekeyser points out, uses an open and transparent financing model, whilst, China makes use of a loan-and-build contracts. To address this issue, compromises will have to be made on both sides. Whether host countries can maintain BRI projects after completion also remains to be seen. BRI projects will also be located in unstable regions, which may be unattractive for investors. The EU has often accused China of a lack of reciprocity in terms of standards and access for European

companies and there is a fear that this will continue with the BRI. However, Mr Dekeyser underlined that these issues were already being discussed through the EU-China Customs agreement and Connectivity Platform and China has provided an action plan for introducing a global, standardised tax across the entire BRI. Finally, the service industry has thus far been completely overlooked in the BRI, particularly by EU leaders, despite the EU having a trade surplus in services with China.

The political challenges associated with the BRI are also less tangible. Currently, the EU is facing an unprecedented wave of populist and anti-globalist rhetoric, which it is addressing internally. Where the main political challenges lie, are in the fear that the BRI is a front for a China's hidden geopolitical agenda. Furthermore, the EU is worried that China seeks to divide-and-rule Europe, through platforms such as the 16+1 platform. However, Mr Dekeyser rebuffed this 'divide-and-rule' fear by explaining that the 16+1 platform is a multilateral setting, of which the EC is an observer. The onus lies with the EU member states to coordinate their policies. The EU is also worried about increased competitiveness from China, as China seeks to upgrade its domestic economy and avoid the middle-income trap. Paradoxically, the EU supports this, yet also fears this might undermine its own economic prosperity. The fear surrounding Chinese state-owned enterprises is that they have an unfair advantage and perhaps also a hidden political agenda. Subsequently, there is growing political resistance to Chinese investments. However, Mr Dekeyser highlights that there are more privately-owned enterprises active in China than state-owned enterprises. The final major concern is the lack of reciprocity in market access in China, though this concern goes both ways. China has taken steps to address this and President Xi Jinping has expressed his intent to open up the Chinese market and level the playing field in telecommunications and finance.

Mr Dekeyser rounded his presentation off by highlighting that there was plenty of room for optimism. The BRI has thus far only advocated the need for openness and connectivity, whilst also exploring the potential for synergies between the EU and China. Mr Dekeyser stated that the EU can be protective of its industry; however, there are legitimate fears that a "protective Europe can become a protectionist Europe". To avoid this, EU investment screenings need to work on a case-by-case basis and the EU and China need to work hard to build trust between them.

Panel Discussion

Dr Jing Men, Director, EU-China Research Centre, College of Europe

Dr Jing Men began her expose by stating that the BRI is hard to conceptualise, thus reiterating something earlier speakers also said. The best way to picture it is through a wide variety of projects in P2P exchanges, further market integration, policy coordination, and infrastructural investment.

Dr Jing explained that the EU only started to express interest in in BRI projects from 2015 onwards, when during a EU-China Summit meeting potential cooperation was discussed under the BRI framework. The Connectivity Platform between the EU and China has seen active attempt to deepen cooperation on BRI projects. However, it is hard for BRI to win infrastructure projects in Europe amid intense competition between the 27 member states. Dr Jing stated that there are currently seven BRI projects, all of which are in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This is reflective of the greater levels of cooperation in CEE, than in Western Europe.

Dr Jing articulated that a "lack of efficiency" characterises the EU, which needs to be addressed for future cooperation. Dr Jing stated that it is a positive development that EU member states

involved themselves with the AIIB, which has already invested in 16 projects. Moreover, Dr Jing briefly addressed the political resistance and fear that has grown in the EU towards Chinese investments. On the one hand, the EU is worried that because it has more voting rights in the AIIB it will disregard international standards. On the other hand, the EU is concerned that China is pursuing a “divide-and-rule” tactic with the EU. Dr Jing stressed that the AIIB is working alongside other multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank to finance BRI projects, and that the divisions within the EU are due to diverging member state interests and not China.

Dr Jing also briefly discussed the differences in mentality between China and the EU. She stated that China is accustomed to “doing things” and solving problems *ad hoc*; whereas the EU likes to create a detailed roadmap, before carrying out its plan. She emphasised that the BRI’s vision is more complimentary to China’s *ad hoc* approach.

To end her discussion Dr Jing stressed the importance of the EU speaking with one voice, thus further emphasising a point made by H.E. Mr Peeters. Ideally, Dr Jing stated, EU member states would sacrifice their own national interests for the sake of a consistently unified EU. The reality however, is quite different, as Dr Jing admitted, thus she stressed the need for the EU and China to align member states’ interests with BRI projects to facilitate cooperation.

Mr Luigi Gambardella, President, ChinaEU

Mr Luigi Gambardella stated that the only two topics of importance are the future and digitalisation, for which the BRI provides plenty of opportunities. He expressed his frustration with the inefficiency of the EC in coming up with proposals, referring to the recent entry into force of a data protection law that took eight years to negotiate as an example. Compared to the BRI, which has already invested USD 900 billion within the span of four years, Mr Gambardella stated that it was already ahead of EC projects like the Juncker Plan. He continued by saying that European industries are always “crying and claiming”, but they do not propose anything. He emphasised that if you believe in something you must invest, which is exactly what he wants the EU to do in the BRI. He threw down the mantle: the EU should invest USD 2 trillion into the BRI. Only then could it be granted an equal seat at the table, for the EU cannot tell China how to invest, if it *itself* is not investing.

Reciprocity and fear had been recurring topics throughout this seminar and Mr Gambardella addressed both of them. He stated that the EU’s public procurement market is “completely closed to foreign companies”. In that way, the EU also suffers from a problem of reciprocity *vis-à-vis* China. Mr Gambardella also underlined the need for the EU to be unified and speak with one voice, for the sake of its credibility. When it comes to political fear, Mr Gambardella sees no reason to be afraid. China does have a clear geopolitical objective he concedes, but the EU simply needs to match that with its own geopolitical objective. Most importantly, Chinese companies do not try to change the rules; they try to use the rules to compete.

To conclude his panel discussion, Mr Gambardella set his sights on the future: 5G, Artificial Intelligence, big data, and the Internet of Things. In his opinion, the EU and China need to capitalise on the possibility of close cooperation in these fields to ensure the best possible development of future technology - a point which was also raised by Mr Mu. Mr Gambardella pleaded that the EU should rediscover its optimism and ambition, for if it is not ready for the world of tomorrow, its industries may lose “millions of jobs”.

Dr Matthieu Burnay, Lecturer in Global Law and Chinese Law, Queen Mary University of London

As the last speaker on the panel Dr Matthieu Burnay began his talk by describing the BRI as a “grand, flexible framework”, behind which there is no secret geopolitical strategy. It is also noteworthy, according to Dr Burnay, that the BRI illustrates how China has abandoned Deng Xiaoping’s motto of hiding China’s true capacity to the world, as it is now projecting its capabilities. Dr Burnay stresses that this is a good thing for the world, as it is time for China to carry its weight on the international stage - especially given the election of Donald Trump in the US and the rise of nationalism and protectionism in the West. Now more than ever, the EU needs a partner and China is willing to take up the mantle and become a “rule shaper” in global governance. Moreover, China has embedded the BRI into the existing architecture of global governance and not advertised it as an alternative. Now that China is embracing and “speaking the language” of multilateralism, the EU should make the most of this opportunity.

Dr Burnay outlined that the BRI provides both opportunity and certainty to for the EU. It might be hard to define what the BRI is, but it is a long-term vision and China is more than committed. The EU needs to adopt a coherent strategy for working with China. Moreover, the P2P exchanges can present another unique opportunity, not only by forging bonds in the academic world, but also by facilitating deepened cooperation and dialogue for business from both the EU and China. Only with such a framework can the EU and China discuss “difficult issues”, like market access and regulatory convergences.

Dr Burnay too discussed the issue of reciprocity between the EU and China. Firstly, he stressed that China’s “two-track approach” of dealing with the 16+1 on the one hand, and the EU on the other, is “counterproductive”. He also emphasised that it was the EU’s task of ensuring it was unified, not China’s, thus echoing what Dr Jing said. Conversely, he also highlighted that China should not underestimate the EU’s ability to speak in a unified voice when in crisis. He pointed to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as examples of this.

Dr Burnay went on to discuss the “paradoxes” that exist in EU Chinese relations. Namely, the need of Chinese investment in the EU - particularly in the technology and security industries - but the simultaneous fear this has created in the EU. In Dr Burnay’s eyes, they are but a reflection of the varying national interests amongst member states in the EU. Such divergence of national interests has caused some member states to abandon core EU values, which disrupts the EU’s internal functionality. In the future, these paradoxes will only grow deeper and may hinder trade talks; he turned to current difficulties with CETA to illustrate this.

Dr Burnay reinforced the notion that the EU needs to regain its confidence and show that it has made a meaningful difference. Here, the paradox lies with the fact that the EU’s investments dwarf those of China in CEE, yet China is somehow presented as CEE’s saviour. This is an image problem and the EU needs to address it. Dr Burnay also called for the establishment of a EU-based agency that would provide non-binding advice on large FDI’s from all countries, as a means helping the EU to speak with one voice. This advice should centre on the social and environmental impacts of these investments, as well as the investments themselves.

Discussion

1) *The BRI could play a leading role in establishing a new global governance infrastructure, which facilitates the collaboration of citizens and institutions collectively. Consequently, institutions such as the BRICS, UN, and EU would not be needed anymore, as they would be embedded in this new infrastructure. Are we seeing a movement to where citizens, organisations, and institutions play a more important role in global governance?*

Dr Matthieu Burnay addressed this question by saying that it will be very unlikely that China will try to increase citizens' and NGO participation in the global governance system. Rather, China's foreign policy is guided by a three-tiered strategic model: firstly, by operating within the current global governance system; secondly, by reforming existing international institutions from the inside; and finally, by establishing other international institutions that either compliment the existing international architecture, or provide alternatives. However, China has not displayed interest in moving away from the existing global governance structure.

2) *Is BRI an opportunity or is it a Trojan horse?*

This question was answered by all three of the panellists. Dr Jing Men stated that the answer depended on whether one perceives China as a constructive power, or a threat. Mr Luigi Gambardella was quick to point out that Chinese investments in the EU are modest at best, but that they have the potential to massively improve European countries and companies. He also emphasised that the answer to this question would depend on how the EU and China interact on digitalisation, as that is the 'new frontier'. China will continue to invest in it; therefore, the EU should invest more as well. Finally, Dr Matthieu Burnay explained that although China failed to respect the world liberal order by refusing to participate in the arbitration tribunal on the South China Sea, it has also shown itself to play by the rules and respect the rules in the WTO. Though the question remains whether this behaviour will have a "positive spill-over" into other areas of global governance.

3) *How will the major geopolitical players Russia and the US react to the BRI's attempt to establish multilateralism in Central Asia?*

Dr Jing Men stated that Russia's and the Eurasian Economic Union's influence should not be underestimated with BRI projects that connect Europe and Asia, particularly in Central Asia. The Ukraine Crisis has soured EU-Russia relations and lead to sanctions and counter sanctions. Russia's sanctions against the EU's agricultural products have a particular impact on BRI trade.

4) *Will China develop its own social welfare state, akin to that of EU member states? Is there any cooperation between Europe and China on developing this?*

Mr Luigi explained that China's President Xi Jinping has pledged to open a fund of USD 100 billion that will be used for health-related issues. Dr Matthieu Burnay stressed that the ageing population in China meant that it was already looking to adopt the harmonious aspects of Europe's welfare system into its own legal system.

5) *Is the BRI railway between China and Europe being subsidised? How can China subsidise this railway if the trains taking goods back to China are only 30 percent full?*

Dr Jing Men answered that this is only sustainable in the short term, as China has a trade surplus with the EU. However, state subsidies would only be temporary, as Beijing has already stated.

6) *How will the US view closer cooperation between China and the EU?*

Mr Luigi Gambardella emphasised that the US has two fears: closer EU-Chinese digital cooperation and that it cannot invest in infrastructure as much as Beijing can. Dr Matthieu Burnay saw this as an opportunity to start developing a closer bond with China, as the two missed out on such an opportunity in 2001, when the US began pursuing an increasingly unilateral path of foreign policy.

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