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Dimensions, Opportunities and Challenges of Mutual Cooperation , March-01-02, 2013

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Changing Geopolitics of the Af-Pak and its Impact on South Asian Regional Security Complex

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Introduction

The role of Af-Pak region essentially comprises of regional buffer encompassing FATA, KP on eastern side of Durand line and the Pashtun dominated provinces on the western side. The South Asian Regional Security Complex (SARSC) has been conventionally identified with the Indo-Pak rivalry in the region ranging from conventional wars to nuclear arms threat. However, the recent interpolation of non-state actors and growing centrality of the non-conventional security challenges have altered the SARSC discourse that hitherto relied on single binary. The growing factoring of Afghanistan and the extension of anomie in a zone that is buffering Durand line led to the coinage of the term 'Afpakistan' denoting a 'zone of violence and insurgency' (Buzan, 2011). The visualisation of SARSC in terms of Asian Supercomplex approach still feeds into the fictility of edges between the South and Southeast Asian Security Complexes. The Middles East still remains an influence down the culvert west of Afghanistan. However, there is a case for re-examining the RSCs under the light of network based security threats largely conveyed by non-state actors. This has been dealt with in the case of domestic political violence, but trans-national network of political violence has gained ground in the Middle East and there is very

portending tendency of Afghanistan falling in course (Harpviken, 2010). The US campaign of Global War Against Terror (GWOT) has significantly altered the state structure in the Af-Pak region. The Guantanamo Bay captives have been released either in swapping for captives or in the hope of bringing the desired bargain for the power stakeholders. However, this vortex seems to be a non-yielding one with summer offensive raising the spectre of macabre death every-time to a heightened crisis. The Af-Pak strategy was unveiled in March 2009. It was a policy largely under the framework of Obama administration, but Pakistan had strong stakes on many accounts. The policy implementation contained drone surgical strike and ground operations across Durand line that impeded Pakistan's security interests in the South Asian region. It also curtailed Pakistan's unbridled contacts with the Afghan groups that were detrimental to the US interest. There had been constant growing threat within Pakistan from these groups who could use Afghanistan for the same reasons of strategic depth (Ahmad, 2010).

The conventional argument of strategic depth is coupled with the Pakistan's defence doctrine of keeping Indian influence at bay on its western borders. This would mean putting itself in between the Indo-Afghan relations. But, 9/11 has dramatically changed the South Asian Regional Security scenario. The US has been working in tandem with Indian policy makers to further consolidate its interests in Afghanistan and this has a degree of assimilation towards India's security interests emerging from Af-Pak region. This reflects upon the necessity to coerce Pakistan to rein in Taliban. Pakistan remains an important non-NATO ally, but the trio of US, India and Pakistan has so far yet to find a sustainable triumvirate equilibrium (F. Khan, 2010). India's ambitions were also zipped into joining the US's GWOT. It wanted to get rid off the international isolation after the 1998 nuclear tests. It also sought opportunity for consolidating its case for permanent member at the UN security council. The relative isolation of Pakistan was a bonus. All this was something that India sought Pakistan clobbering under the new Indo-US strategic partnership at the mantle of Af-Pak

policy drive (Kirk, 2010). The major effort was to de-hyphenate the US's and largely the West's approach towards India, which hitherto had been a binary of Indo-Pak discourse. This seemed possible with India sharing strategic interests of the West in Afghanistan. But, the events took India by surprise that there was even consideration of roping in the Kashmir issue to the Indo-Pak relations so much so to satisfy the Pakistani counterparts in the whole Af-Pak policy apparatus. This led to relegation of the Af-Pak policy to India's own Afghanistan policy.

The chances of India leading the security architecture in South Asia dimmed as the West again pinning hopes on Pakistan to deliver. This was also revealed at the London Conference. The January 2010 London Conference was a watershed for South Asian security framework. It reaffirmed the in and out approach of the West to handle the threats. The London Conference paved way for Pakistan-Afghanistan dialogue so far as the role of Taliban was concerned. Turkey became an important facilitator of such talks and January 2011 witnessed diplomatic exercise for bringing Taliban to negotiating table. It was only the December 2011 Bonn conference that brought again into the framework with a greater proactive role in Afghan security concern. The Bonn conference clearly felt the need to raise the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF). This was an opportunity India had been looking for to grab. It offered the facilities and necessary support for training of Afghan personnel both in India and Afghanistan. This was also clearly earmarked by the fact that killing of the High Peace Council chief, former president Rabbani led strong opinion against Pakistan both within Afghan policymakers and the European countries (Synovitz, 2010). The whole idea about security situation in Afghanistan themed on Af-Pak model was to facilitate the security coordination between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The increase in troops by 30,000 known as the surge was important policy declaration by Obama administration. And, it was July 2011 proposed for the beginning of the troop withdrawal. Major effort had been to allow Afghan army to increasingly conduct ground operations and the US would largely be providing their air

logistics. This happened to be an important cornerstone of Af-Pak policy post July 2011. Another important development in the wake of Af-Pak policy was seeking increasing participation from northern neighbours of Afghanistan and Russia gained importance in new partnerships that were sought by the West. The military strategy of the US involves creation of a special intelligence centre at Pentagon and also a coordination cell that has interaction with field staff through video conferencing facility. The convergence of academicians, defence security personnel and think tank has been designed to give maximum efficacy to Af-Pak strategy (Fair, 2010).

The major effort has been to raise a trilateral structure that would be able to bring stability. The covenants of the strategy have been to delegate the Afghans a greater control about their political future. Therefore, any peace strategy has to be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led. The second part is to seek integration of Taliban only within the framework of Afghan constitution. This has been quite tricky issue as Taliban have never acquiesced to the new constitution. In fact, this issue has bearing for South Asian region given the fact that India has been quite supportive of the democratic process in Afghanistan, including constructing Afghan parliament. Pakistan has tried to define democracy and peace process in Afghanistan based on its own political ideology. It started with the arrest of Mullah Barader and with some major Taliban heads, who were offered to Afghan government with an opportunity to negotiate (Subrahmanyam, 2010). This was suddenly discarded as the steep decline in the US-Pakistan relations after the November 2011 strike. It was amply clear that the hopes of cooperation from Pakistan on bringing Taliban to negotiating table was dwindling fast. This was quite in succession to the successful raid for holding out Osama bin Laden in May 2011. The growing distrust between Pakistan and the US had significant impact on Afghanistan-Pakistan cooperation on terror. The failure seemed not only limited to political circles in respective capitals, but also the rise in border skirmishes since 2012. The border conflict has further deteriorated the hopes for

peaceful transition. The major issue has been the cross-border insurgency across Afghanistan and Pakistan. The strategic assets defined by Pakistani military establishment have been proving to be a double-edged sword as Taliban has been threatening the state at both sides of Durand line. The failure to formulate single strategy for tackling the terror menace has been proving detrimental to common masses across the Af-Pak region. A situation that is being exploited by those forces that operate globally and are looking for safe heavens in the mountainous region spread all along the Durand line. This has been an important factor that could qualitatively alter the South Asian security scenario. They are the strategic assets for none but can suitably modify their approach to bargain with the states on either side leading to further escalation and mistrust. The IS has increased its presence in Pakistan with growing connections amongst Jihadi groups. There are reports of many splinter Taliban groups joining the IS as they have been paying salaries and better organisational structure. Most of these are recruiting foreigners who are lodged in the FATA territories. The ability to raise a single command structure across Af-Pak makes IS even more formidable force as it can gain upperhand over the lack of cross-border operational capabilities of both, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The ISIS in South Asia

There is another component of growing impact of inter-regional translocation of conflict. The impact of battle against Islamic State (Daesh) is being increasingly felt in the South Asian region. According to the US CRS Report, "The Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS) aka Daesh is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that controls large areas of Iraq and Syria" (Blanchard & Humud, 2016). As many as 36,500 individuals from more than 100 countries have travelled to Syria to join Daesh since 2012. The IS has been making operations global and striking beyond Iraq and Syria as a priority. One of the important cause of attractiveness to IS jihadi mentality has been the conflicts

of ethnic, sectarian and socio-political nature that has disgruntled population vulnerable to IS slogans. The South Asian region given its enormity of diversity and difficult-fractured past of nation-building has several fault lines that remain exposed to such conflating tendencies. The added fuel to fire is the inter-state conflict that has this temptation of deploying IS resources against one state by another. This generic nature of non-state actors in South Asia remain a very potent danger as the region also harbours sizeable number of nuclear arsenals. India has been looking at the South Asian security environment with the newly introduced threats with the focus of Islamic state on the region. The challenge has been to counter the subterfuge both at maritime and cross-border levels. The ISIS has already made its presence felt in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is important in the wake of regional network of Al-Qaeda were not able to carve out such potent structure. India had already felt the heat when in Iraq several of the migrant workers were kidnapped by ISIL and they were forced to work for them. It is also that Indian Muslims working in the Middle East are being the soft target for recruiting in the jihadi line of work. Although, one of the sympathizer of IS who was interrogated revealed that the Arabs don't consider South Asians to be better fighters and therefore are given menial jobs and low ranks in the ISIS hierarchy. The most important fact has been the greater exposure of South Asian Muslims to variegated population and the acknowledgement of diversity as fact of life. This has been a great caveat as it has deterred ISIS from looking for easy opportunity to brainwash people coming from this part. This has allowed to ISIS to explore the pre-existing hotbeds of militancy and terrorism. And, the Af-Pak belt figures in prominence as the decades of religious war has disrupted lives of the people on both the sides of the border. And, the people are in desperate need of money and living making them vulnerable to taking offers from ISIS. The ISIS has designated the Af-Pak operating region under the command of DAESH, an acronym for al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). There is ample proof that the Af-Pak remains the strategic breeding

ground for Daesh operatives. The Khorasan section of ISIL has become active in Afghanistan since last 2 years and it has threatened to extend its reach across entire South Asia. The majority of funds for Daesh came from oil-rich Arab nations, while Turkey became the hub of co-ordinating the logistics for the group. Afghanistan has found such tendencies threatening its stability, as quite more often the sectarian strife have got converted into ethnic strife. This was exploited by Taliban in 1990s, and same might be exploited by ISIL-K operatives now. South Asia has several hotspots, where in Daesh can easily zip in their modules and take advantage of the disaffected population. There is hardly any proof of Daesh having presence on Indian soil, but the waving of their flags in Kashmir valley only indicates the potential threat that can re-design the narrative of SARSC factoring in the Islamic state. The paper is a theoretical model approach to look into the role of transnational conflict in affecting the regional security scenario with particular emphasis on South Asia. It would also try to look into the growing challenges for the India security amid these perspectives.

The Islamic State operated across Af-Pak with bombings in Karachi in May 2015 to January 2016 attacks on Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad and Nangerhar. According, to the US Department of State, the ISIL-K announced its formation in January 2015 and since then it has operative region buffering the Durand line. It primarily comprises former members of Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Afghan Taliban. "The Department of State has announced the designation of ISIL-K as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act," a statement by the Department of State said (Press, 2016). It is interesting to go through the etymological explanation of Islamic State Khorasan Branch. They allude to the period of Umayyids and Abbassids, who were the pioneers from Arab world settling in Central Asia and propagating Islam. The region known as Khorasan (Khor-meaning the East) comprised Western Afghanistan along Helmand-Herat axis, the Eastern part of Iran running from Kirman to Nishapur and the present day

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This geographic realm still remains out of bound for Islamic State as the Central Asian States have rejected IS version of understanding about religion. The Iran being a Shiite nation is in conflict in Iraq with IS and the western Afghanistan largely remains a region populated Turko-Afghan tribes, which are quite distinct from the typical south eastern Pashtun geo-cultural landscape. It is pertinent that the foremost presence of Daesh has been near the Pakistan border in the two provinces of Nangerhar and Paktia. They were also the tactical regions for Al-Qaeda during the Operation Anaconda in the aftermath of 9/11. These two provinces are adjoining to the FATA territories of Kurram and Orakzai agencies. The geographic location bears lot of imprint to explain why the IS-Khorasan is not in Herat, but in the vicinity of Jalalabad. The IS has been recruiting the youth from FATA tribes and very few are actually from Afghanistan. The militants who were either defeated or had depleted resources on the Pakistani side have found it convenient to move across Durand line and join the Deash in these two adjoining provinces (Shinwari & Siddique, 2016).

The Daesh or the IS is also a conglomerate of several Pakistan and Afghan military commanders, who had been close to Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan. They are ensconced into the Spin Ghar mountains, which earlier provided safe recluse to Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bi Laden. There is a unique geopolitical advantage for IS to remain in the region as it is not easy to flush out the adversary without inflict self-losses. The IS commander Hafiz Saeed, who has declared allegiance to Abu-bakr al-Baghdadi hails from Orakzai agency. There are many commanders from TTP, who also have declared their loyalty to the IS head (Ansar, 2015). The AQ branch of South Asia was under the leadership of Ayman al Zawahiri, who tried to resuscitate the movement in the aftermath of US's drone war. There have been some Central Asian groups who have been seeking strategic depth in South Asia and subsequently tried to bandwagon AQ in South Asia. This provided a fertile ground for expansion of IS in the region where it could nurture ambitions for further growth. The presence of Al Qaeda (AQ) and Associates has

been for a long time in the region. Taliban had been the invariable ally of Wabahi extremist group in the region. The IS has been vituperative in reprobating the locals practising Islam. They have declared the provinces of Nangerhar, Paktia and Khost surrounding Kurram agency as infested with the infidels; the same approach used against the Yazidis in Iraq (Ali, 2015). Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan Janan Musazai recently accused Pakistan of harbouring the IS support groups that has affected the relations for both the countries. The fact that IS is following into the foot trails of Taliban strongholds has brought the two in contest for securing the geopolitical supremacy. The Taliban have been getting uneasy with IS spreading as far as Helmand and Farah. These two are the important provinces so far as the narco-economy of Taliban is concerned. They garner their resources from these regions, something now vied by the IS. Taliban has been often clubbed with the Islamic State in the same fashion as earlier with Al-Qaeda (Mora, 2016). The Taliban have found a dual challenge of not only saving their territorial influence but also their identity of Deobandi Islam followers.

The Islamic State has been usurping their religious space by brandishing more virulent form of practices under the banner of Islam. The killing of Shiite minority in November 2015 which included nine year old girl by IS in Arghandab, Zabul (Hazara.net, 2015). The Taliban have been responsible for the atrocities on religious minorities in Afghanistan, which is losing its hardliners to the newly arrived Islamic state. President Ghani had to stand up and assure the country that the Daesh would not be successful in the state and it shall use all might to decimate the ISIL-K (Mora, 2016b). The Taliban feeling challenged still harbours on its ethnoscape, which predominantly Pashtun land. The Daesh has tried to be *amicus curae* for the Pashtuns and their connections with Taliban, but scholars doubt this could prove durable for any solid partnership good enough to threaten the Afghan state (Rubin, 2015). This is evident as in June 2015 Taliban suffered brutality at the hands of Daesh in Nangerhar. The larger part is that Daesh has a Central Asian and South Asian component to its strategy. The Islamic Movement

of Uzbekistan has declared allegiance to Daesh, which makes it quite serious threat in countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan bordering Afghanistan. The recruitment from Pashtun tribes of FATA together with Turkic and Arab militia makes Daesh a potential threat to Afghanistan. This group of fighters do not hold any legitimate challenge to Afghan state unlike the Taliban, who stake claim by repudiating the constitution. The possible peace talks between Afghan Government and Taliban have been disrupted by Islamic state elements who are well aware of their weak legitimacy in the region. They have talked about establishing the Kaliphate, which is totally devoid of any socio-cultural underpinnings of Afghan society, besides unlike the Arab landscape, the Afghans have been suffering under massive poverty and lack of any significant economy.

The funding of Daesh, unlike Al-Qaeda is not limited to Arab world. The European countries have found it difficult to cut off these channels and sources of recruiting. This makes Daesh truly an internationalist force with men and material being gathered on global scale. The positioning of Daesh in Afghanistan threatens inter-state relations, both towards Iran and Central Asian Republics. Russia and China too are keen on denying stronghold as it would affect their restive provinces. This makes a unique situation, where Daesh would be forced to increase its presence in Afghanistan. The attacks on Army School in Peshawar and Baccha Khan University, Charsada indicate the regrouping of militants that would soon try to rally behind Islamic State. The Afghan Taliban is keen to fight Daesh influence in Afghanistan, but same is not the case in Pakistan, where the TTP is at odds with Pakistan army. There is also claim that Daesh operatives were being provided logistics by Pakistan army, and many of them joined ISIS to fight Asad regime (Gall, 2016). This has already brought stern reaction from Iran as it is witnessing intense conflict based on sectarian lines. The ISIS has been receiving quite strong support from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which all are opposed to Shiite Iran, and Syria's Assad. Iran earlier had arrested a number of Pakistani citizens, who were in transit to join Daesh (BBCNews, 2014). The coalition

against terror lead by Saudi Arabia surprised Pakistan with its inclusion in the ranks; and this has something to do with the funding and support being provided by the patrons. Already there is concern about the ideological appeal Daesh has in Pakistan as Punjab is witnessing the vituperative tendencies (Shah, 2016). The reaction to the hanging of Salman Taseer in Pakistan signifies the scope of radicalisation that Punjab province of Pakistan commands. This is a major threat to South Asia as Pakistan is a nuclear armed country. It has the potential to disrupt the balance of power beyond sustenance. India finds this phenomena difficult in the wake of no dialogue between the neighbours on such threatening issues. The need of the hour is to forge a common South Asian front against any such dangerous trend and take adequate measures to prevent the overspill of Middle East conflict in the region.

Factoring India in Af-Pak relations

Pakistani scholars believe that composite dialogue is not able to head on because of the core area, the Kashmir and terrorism as perceived by the two countries. The Kargil war in 1999 appeared to give the taste about the nature of things between the two countries. It later on followed by the attack on Indian Parliament that led to almost heightened nuclear trigger point between the two countries. Since then 2004 to 2008 there were four rounds of talks known as the composite dialogue (Akhtar, 2015). The Indo-Pak tensions have been seen as neo-realist approach to securitization, wherein every Indian step is counter-measured by the Pakistani security establishment (Javaid & Kamal, 2015). It is interesting that most of the scholars in Pakistan define India-Afghanistan relations as a nexus. The history and pretext of such a nexus remains elusive in successive discussions. It is acknowledged that Indian economy is the biggest enabler to neo-liberalist regime of cooperative security environment. There is possibility of engendering a benign unipolar structure in the region led by India and there is satisfactory scope of consensual bargain (Hanif, 2010). The fact remains that regional security architecture are generic in nature and are peripheral to any possible global

ordering. There is lack of security interdependence in the South Asian regional security, so far as India-Pakistan relations. The rest of the South Asian countries have security reliance on India and are dependent on India's intervention for securing state. In fact, India-Pakistan rivalry allows South Asia being sucked into great power supercomplex. It happened in 1950s and it has been happening post 9/11 (Buzan, 2003). The most important transformation has been due to the Indo-US partnership that has become an important factor in South Asian Regional Security Complex (SARSC). Pakistan's stakes on its alliance with the US in Global War on Terror (GWOT) have seemed to be out of hoops from the latter. The major grunt is that Pakistan is made to suffer all that was making of the US design in the first place. There is opinion that the US has used Pakistan and made to suffer with both inside and external terrorism. Pakistan hoped that the "exit strategy" of Obama administration would enable the refocussing upon Pakistan. But, there seems a lack of Pakistani interest in the whole strategy (Javaid & Khan, 2015). The failure to come up with such option has led to growing distrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan cashed in by Taliban that seems to have resurfaced amid such strategic failures.

Pakistan's disaffection and disillusionment with the US's Af-Pak strategy has regional implications. Pakistan has been uneasy of India's relations with the US and Afghanistan and formers growing presence in Afghanistan, which happened to be its strategic depth. Scholars in Pakistan believe that India's support to democracy in Afghanistan and strengthening its economic life has little to do with the lives of ordinary Afghans. In fact, India is penetrating Afghanistan through these instruments to secure its own strategic objectives (Tariq et al., 2015). But, Pakistani scholars fail to examine their own case wherein their opposition to Indian actions does not imply Afghanistan's acceptance of their argument. Afghanistan rejects Pakistan's suspicion about India's presence in their land. Most of the scholars take realist perception about the Indo-Pak relations where they invoke balance of power approach. The Kashmir imbroglio is only

seen as consequence of unfinished agenda of partition. Pakistan sees Afghanistan's inclination towards India as a source of trouble for its western borders. There is deep seated grudge that despite hosting 3 million Afghan refugees there is no sense of acknowledgement to the huge burden of hosting them. The lack of trust among both the countries has been politically an emotive issue. India has been wary of Pakistan's conceptualisation of strategic depth. Pakistan had used Taliban regime to nurture Kashmiri jihadi elements on Afghan soil. These were trained in camps in Khost and Paktia, and were being used for waging a proxy-war against India (Khan & Afridi, 2015). Pakistan still has a paranoia of choosing the preferred partners in Afghanistan as dealing with Afghan state seems to be weildy business. The easy comfort in Pashtun ethnic linkages provided putative reasons for hooping Taliban. The idea was not only to stabilize the Durand line but also seek in favourable terms extending energy and trade opportunities with Central Asia and beyond (Hussain, 2015). India has already extended its approach with its Connect Central Asia policy and bringing Iran into the framework for the same. Its linkages with Russia and Iran have proved handy in by-passing Pakistan's interregnum. This was based on time-tested partnership during the Taliban period, when extremist Sunni regime was harsh on Shia Hazara and Tajik-led Northern Alliance. India, Iran and Russia had partnered then, Central Asian countries in order to prevent extension of Taliban and Al Qaeda influence into the Central Asian countries.

The pessimism is not the summon bonum of India-Pakistan-Afghanistan trio. The much touted TAPI seems to be gaining slow momentum and there is an increasing realisation that economic opportunities mustn't be wasted in the heat of strategic competition. Pakistan also came realising fast with the growing clout of Chinese business in Pakistani soil and the opening of Gwadar has brought unintended competition for the manufacturers in Pakistan. The Chinese goods are occupying larger share of Pakistani market and the precious exchange is drained. Pakistan has been looking for becoming trade and energy corridor (TEC) for the

Central Asian countries. But, the investments in this sector are largely Chinese. The comparative advantage of Pakistan is losing ground to Iran and Turkey, who are investing more in their transportation infrastructure. It is the Indo-Iranian interest joined with Russian layout of North-South corridor that strongly competes with Sino-Pak corridor in South Asia (Adnan & Fatima, 2015).

Conclusion

India and Pakistan have been seen as competitors in Afghanistan, but there is also an opinion that looks hopeful towards greater degree of cooperation in coming years. This is engendered by the fact that political institutions are having a major say in Pakistan's external policy formulation. The brunt of terrorism has really peaked in Pakistani society and killing of one of the Sabri brothers represent acute sense of realisation that its time to grasp the reality and seek cooperation within the region to curb the menace. The role of external powers seems to remain a permanent feature of SARSC, as China and the US have cojoined Pakistan and India respectively. This bipolar relations may be good for prevention of conflict escalation to nuclear levels. But, a regional integration framework would remain a discouraged option due to the vested interest of Great powers. Besides, India outsizeing the most, it would have little incentive to take interest within the region and due to its size and growing friction in regional integration. India has already been looking towards East and Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin American for its renewed global focus. Its economic interest would be guiding the strategic ones. Afghanistan has been on crucial juncture, where it needs a requisite support for raising economic infrastructure to sustain migrant population and discourage people from joining Taliban. India-Afghanistan partnership has actually meant to serve this geoeconomic goal and Pakistan seems lesser acclimatized to this notion of peace. The South Asian RSC would still take some more time to mature into a region of cooperative security, so as to form a security community. This would not only enable regional security but also prevent Af-Pak from being viewed by external powers as breeding ground for extremism.

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