

# Impact of the Recent South Korean Presidency Change on Security Relationship with North Korea

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## ABSTRACT

Tensions in the Korean Peninsula have soared with the advancement of North Korea's (DPRK) nuclear weapons development. Along with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, DPRK's 7th nuclear test is impending. In the era of a "new Cold War," the presidency of South Korea (ROK) changed in May 2022. This study examined how the recent ROK presidency change affects its security relationship with DPRK. To analyze this, I performed a literature review of DPRK-related policies that former ROK presidents implemented. I used qualitative data from my three in-depth interviews that focused on Yoon's policy initiatives in three aspects: DPRK policy, US-ROK alliance, military defense. To obtain updated information on ROK's international situation, I conducted a debriefing of the 8th Yonhap News Symposium on Korean Peace (June 2022). Throughout past ROK governments, the strategies toward DPRK differed significantly between progressive and conservative parties. Inter-Korean relations were stronger under progressive party governments, but neither made progress towards DPRK's denuclearization. President Yoon stated his policy would be principled and consistent, with a strong US-ROK alliance and international cooperation. Yoon planned the implementation of ROK's 3-axis system and the establishment of the Military Strategic Headquarters, including advanced detection and precision strike counter-force capabilities. If he can achieve a US-ROK alliance and attain non-nuclear deterrence, ROK's security relationship with DPRK will likely be safer than in the past. My research addresses a detailed question that is part of a larger global landscape to analyze ROK's international affairs and gain insight into effective security policies.

## **Introduction**

After the Korean War, the Korean Peninsula was split into the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North, and it has not been reunited since. Tensions between the two nations are still in full force and have taken a turn for the worse due to DPRK's nuclear weapons development, which is not an issue close to being resolved (Cho, 2020). With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the strategic and military competition between the United States (US) and China, it is evident that a new Cold War is in motion. Additionally, North Korea's nuclear weapons now have a higher yield; the nation possesses Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) that are capable of reaching long-range targets, such as Guam and Alaska (Korda, 2022). With the possibility of North Korea striking the US mainland, sufficient defense options are an integral part of US preparation for an attack by North Korea (Chung, 2016).

Bent on accelerating its nuclear development, North Korea has executed a series of nuclear tests, with the 6th test executed in September 2017. North Korea ended its moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests in March 2022. Furthermore, in April, DPRK announced the possibility of a preemptive nuclear strike during its military parade; thus its 7th nuclear test is inevitable. Succeeding former President Moon Jae-in, President Yoon Suk-yeol assumed office on May 10th, 2022. Unlike President Moon, President Yoon displayed himself from the onset of his campaign as a leader who is strongly opposed to North Korea's persistent

reluctance to denuclearize and who is ready to combat North Korea's nuclear threats head-on. During the ROK-US Summit Joint Press Conference in Seoul on May 21st, 2022, President Yoon expressed that, "We, as the leaders of the two countries, reiterated our common goal of the complete denuclearization of the DPRK. There is no compromise for security. Under this shared belief, we concurred that strong deterrence against North Korea is paramount" (Biden & Yoon, 2022, p.1).

This study examines how the recent South Korean presidency change affects South Korea's security relationship with North Korea. This research is relevant to today's society, particularly as DPRK is on the verge of conducting its 7th nuclear test and is closely monitoring the strong international sanctions imposed on Russia due to Putin's invasion of Ukraine. It will address a detailed question that is part of a larger global security perspective in order to comprehensively analyze the current international affairs involving ROK and to gain insight into the security policies that may best lead to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

## Literature Review

In October 1953, the US and ROK signed the Korean Mutual Defense Treaty which stated that both countries would assist each other if either was under armed attack, and that US troops would be stationed in South Korea. This was two months after the closing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, and a US-ROK alliance has been maintained ever since. This alliance was central to protecting South Korea from North Korea's impending threats and contributed to South Korea's greater economic stability (Bluth & Prak, 2020). The administration of the first President Rhee Syngman (1948-1960) viewed North Korea from an anti-communist perspective and laid the groundwork for establishing national security against North Korea (Paek, 2004). Byung-Deok Woo (2020) reported that a strong US-ROK military alliance decreased the number of North Korea's missile threats from 1960 to 2016. However, in a recent study, it was described that US extended deterrence for ROK has weakened compared to the last 70 years, following DPRK's advanced development of nuclear weapons that are able to reach the US mainland. Extended deterrence is a principle where the US follows through on its commitment to deter both nuclear and non-nuclear attacks in defense of its allies (Choi, 2021).

Since 1948, South Korea has had a total of 13 presidents, with Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) being the 12th. Recently, President Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-present) succeeded President Moon. The South Korean government system vests power into the hands of the President, who is the head of the Executive branch. Throughout past administrations, there have been changes in the security dynamics between ROK and DPRK depending on each president's ideologies on North Korea, along with other domestic and international situations.

From the first President Rhee Syngman (1948-1960) to the seventh President Kim Young-sam (1993-1998), South Korea did not experience significant changes in its policies regarding North Korea and its alliance with the US (Lee, S.S., 2016). Although sixth President Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993) led the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement and the Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it turned out that North Korea's reactions to these agreements were merely political gestures, rather than promises it intended to keep (Kim, 2012). The following president, Kim Young-sam, built a new framework for self-sustaining homeland security by reorganizing the South Korean military. He created civilian control over the military in terms of defense and security policymaking (Kim & Nam, 2021). In addition, his administration went through a transitional phase from an anti-communist approach towards North Korea to a moderate approach (Park, 2014).

### Progressive Government: Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003)

North Korea had a leadership change from Kim Il-sung (1966-1994) to his son, Kim Jong-il (1994-2011). South Korea's 8th President Kim Dae-jung implemented a new "sunshine" policy towards North Korea, which bene-

fited inter-Korean relations in terms of successful inter-Korean summits, greater economic commerce, and separated families meeting each other (Jeong, 2002). North Korea had to accept the offer of this sunshine policy in order to ensure its economic survival and strengthen its regime (Lee, 2001). The Kim Dae-jung Administration's relations with the US weakened during the George W. Bush Administration, due to contrasting views on North Korea between the South Korean progressive party and the US conservative party (Park & Cheong, 2009). President Kim Dae-jung's North Korea policy created two main negative impacts on South Korea's military defense: there was suspension of the "enemy concept" that South Korea previously had of North Korea, and reduced autonomy of the Ministry of National Defense (Choi, 2019).

### Progressive Government: Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008)

Towards the end of Kim Dae-jung's term in October 2002, US officials discovered North Korea's secret nuclear development of highly potent uranium bombs (Koh, 2005). President Roh's North Korea policy was similar to President Kim's. While President Roh reinstated inter-Korean exchange and cooperation in order to ensure economic and relational stability, North Korea refused to participate in the six-party talks during Roh's term. In February 2005, North Korea declared that it was in possession of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the country conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006 (Lee, 2008). Following this, President Roh attempted to fundamentally modify his policy toward North Korea, but he was barred by bureaucrats who disputed the legitimacy and effectiveness of the policy change (Ahn, 2008). The US-ROK alliance went into a period of decline due to differing core ideologies of the US and South Korean governments on North Korea (Sohn & Kim, 2016). As for military defense, President Roh proposed a self-reliant national military defense system, voiced for a transfer of the wartime operational control from the United States Forces Korea (USFK) to South Korea, and proceeded with a new legislative process for his defense policy, called "Defense Reform 2020" (Shim, 2017; Kim & Min, 2022).

### Conservative Government: Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013)

As the successor to President Roh, President Lee was from a different party and took a pragmatic approach toward North Korea, starting with a new policy: "Denuclearization, Opening, and 3000 initiatives." The administration expressed that if North Korea denuclearized and opened its economy, South Korea would cooperate with the international community to make North Korea's per capita income \$3000 within the next 10 years (Han, 2009; Lee, CH, 2013). However, during President Lee's term, North Korea provoked South Korea several times; a tourist was shot in the Kungang Mountain in July 2008, North Korea conducted its second nuclear test in May 2009, South Korea's Cheonan submarine was torpedoed in March 2010, and Incheon Yeonpyeong Island was bombed in November 2010 (Park, 2012). The Mount Kungang tourism industry was one of the major initiatives to develop inter-Korean relations and build trust. However, following the murder of the South Korean tourist by North Korea, Mount Kungang tourism was officially closed (Seo, 2009). Furthermore, to respond to North Korea's sinking of the Cheonan naval submarine, President Lee implemented the 5.24 measures, which were sanctions imposed on North Korea. These sanctions effectively shut down any economic relations with North Korea, only excluding the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). Commerce would only resume with the approval of the South Korean government; this action resulted in a deterioration of inter-Korean relations (Yang, 2021). On the other hand, the ROK-US alliance was strengthened, as President Lee declared that the two nations would respond together to North Korea's series of ambushes through extended deterrence (Lee, S.S., 2016). Toward the far end of President Lee's term, when the next president was already elected, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in February 2013.

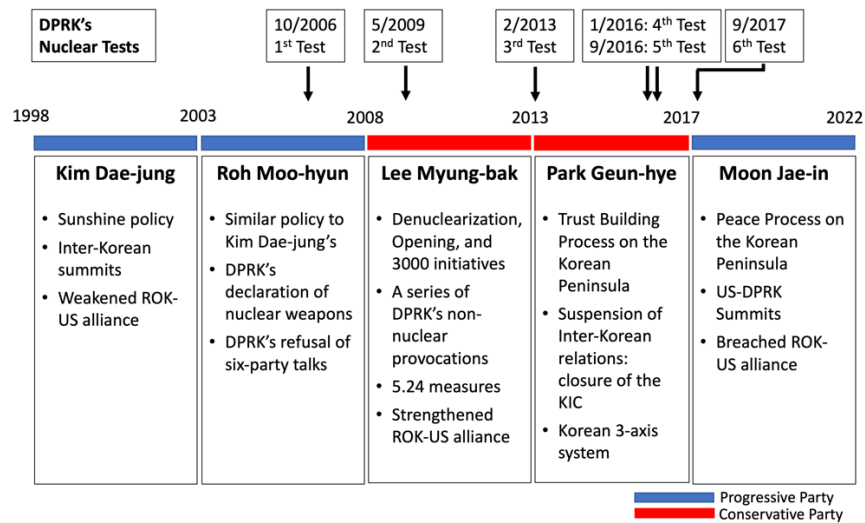
### Conservative Government: Park Geun-hye (2013-2017)

The policies from the 8th President Kim Dae-jung to the 11th President Park Geun-hye adjusted mainly according to the progressive vs. conservative political beliefs of the current president. Specifically, the conservative Park Geun-hye's administration policy, "Trust Building Process on the Korean Peninsula," was meant to develop trust with North Korea that could be maintained. The policy firmly stated that if North Korea did not abide by the agreements, it would be subject to punishment and its offenses would be recognized. Through this policy, South Korea focused on building a mutual relationship with North Korea once again (Lee, S.U., 2016). During President Park's term, her administration was faced with North Korea's fourth and fifth nuclear tests and a subsequent long suspension of inter-Korean relations. In fact, after North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test in January 2016, President Park closed the Kaesong complex. It would prove difficult to unify the two Koreas, especially due to Kim Jong-un's nuclear and economic policies that were in place at the time (Park, 2013). In terms of military defense, President Park announced that both the Kill-Chain and Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) systems would be finished by 2017 (Kim, 2013). After South Korean soldiers were injured by DMZ mines in August 2015 and North Korea's WMD experiments took place during her term, South Korea allied with the US and warned the North of a retribution, with the UN security council issuing sanctions against North Korea (Kim & Kim, 2015).

### Progressive Government: Moon Jae-in (2017-2022)

President Moon succeeded President Park in March 2017, and he pursued the "Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula," following in the steps of progressive party Presidents Kim and Roh. President Moon made achievements such as holding a successful inter-Korean summit, restoring dialogue, and easing military tensions. Internationally, two US-DPRK Summits transpired in June 2018 and February 2019. However, the second US-DPRK summit fell apart, largely due to the nations' differing demands; the US stated that North Korea needed to dispose of all nuclear weapons before any further negotiations, while North Korea stated that all sanctions needed to be released. President Moon viewed North Korea as a nation that could be shown sympathy to, when instead it may have been more practical to have a negative attitude regarding North Korea's denuclearization. While there were benefits of having an inter-Korean relationship, Moon's administration breached alliance with the US and other international countries that considered denuclearization as a prerequisite for further resolution (Ju, 2019; Suh & Um, 2018). After North Korea's sixth nuclear test in September 2017 and multiple missile tests throughout his term, there were no reports of official actions or sanctions from President Moon. Additionally, President Moon repeatedly suggested a "Declaration to the End of the War," including at the 76th session of the U.N. General Assembly, and he attempted to have a peace agreement with North Korea. However, there was no more dialogue on this between each of the relevant countries: US, ROK, DPRK, and China. In a recent study, Kang-nyeong Kim (2022) interpreted that there were discrepancies among the views of each of the four countries.

The policies of ROK governments and the security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula from 1998-2022 are summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Summary of ROK government policies and security dynamics from 1998-2022.

## Methods

To evaluate the new President Yoon Suk-yeol's policies, I conducted three interviews (former government official In Kee Choi, retired Colonel Yooshin Im, Law Professor Sun Pil Eum) focusing on how the new President's initiatives affected the following three aspects: North Korea policy including denuclearization issue, ROK-US alliance policy, and ROK military defense policy. The interview with Mr. Choi was centered on President Yoon's election pledges for all three aspects. The interview with Colonel Im was focused on ROK military defense policy. The interview with Professor Eum yielded information about North Korea policy. In these interviews, I obtained supplementary information about DPRK reactions to former ROK Presidents' changes in policy after DPRK's attacks.

To gain the most updated information on ROK's international situation, I performed a debriefing of the 8th Yonhap News Symposium on Korean Peace that was held on June 24th, 2022: "President Yoon Suk-yeol Era: US-China-Russia Tensions - The Future of the Korean Peninsula."

## Results

When current President Yoon succeeded President Moon in May 2022, even with President Moon's peace process policy in place, North Korea continued to carry out further missile tests in 2022. Internationally, US-DPRK denuclearization negotiations were stalled after the last talk in Stockholm, Sweden in October 2019.

### President Yoon's North Korea policy

President Yoon proposed a pragmatic approach in his North Korea and international policies. He explained that if North Korea denuclearized, economic incentives would be offered in a scope beyond the humanitarian relief that was pledged by former President Moon (Martin & Fairclough, 2022). During the ROK-US Summit Joint Press Conference in Seoul on May 21st, 2022, President Yoon stated, "A sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula is underpinned by a principled and consistent policy towards North Korea" (Biden & Yoon, 2022, p.1). To achieve this, Yoon emphasized South Korea's alliance with the US and stressed international cooperation in order to implement U.N. Security Council sanctions.

## President Yoon's US Alliance Policy

In the same ROK-US Summit Joint Press Conference, President Yoon stated, “we shared the goal of developing the ROK-US alliance into a global, comprehensive, strategic alliance” (Biden & Yoon, 2022, p.1). The core of his international policy is an alliance with the US, and Yoon planned to bolster extended deterrence against North Korea; this would include joint US-ROK military drills, such as field exercises and pre-strike capabilities designed for impending North Korea's threats. The Washington Post reported in April 2022, “Central to Yoon's foreign policy is ‘rebuilding’ South Korea's alliance with the United States, a nod to Washington's frustrations with the ongoing government of President Moon Jae-in” (Lee, 2022, p.1). In addition, President Yoon expressed his interest in South Korea's future involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which is a partnership among the US, Australia, India, and Japan.

## President Yoon's Military Defense Policy

South Korea's 3-axis system has been set up since President Lee's administration, and during President Yoon's election, he pledged to restore a 3-axis system, build the Korean ironclad defense system and foster scientific and technological forces based on AI. In addition, he promised to equip intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance departments of the military with independent abilities.

The 3-axis system is composed of 3 elements: Kill Chain, Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR). Kill Chain is the first line of defense which is used to disable missiles before North Korea can launch them, as a preemptive protection strike. The core power of this system lies in the use of reconnaissance satellites to neutralize attacks and detect targets. KAMD is the second measure, and it is used if South Korea misses the opportunity to implement Kill Chain; if North Korea succeeds in launching the missiles, South Korea uses defense mechanisms such as 3000-ton submarines, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and missile carriers to bring the North Korean threat down. KMPR is the last measure, where South Korea will retaliate proportionally to North Korea's attack. In such an instance, assets such as F-35 Lightning II, F-15 Eagles, and South Korea's own missiles will be used. Examples of ordnance types that will be deployed through the F-35A multirole stealth fighter include Korean tactical surface to surface missiles, the Extended Range Patriot missile (PAC-3 MSE), and the Hyunmoo series ballistic missiles. In order to systematically control this 3-axis system, the establishment of Military Strategic Headquarters was planned to be complete by 2024. Additional deterrence aspects include using cyber warfare and space power in the scope of command.

## DPRK Reaction to former ROK Presidents' Changes in Policy after North Korea's attacks

After the Mount Kumgang tourism industry was closed by President Lee in July 2008, North Korea announced that South Korean personnel in the vicinity would be expelled, that it would voice greater military responses against minor hospitality in the future, and that the flow of South Korean personnel and vehicles entering the area would be carefully monitored. Following the 5.24 measures that were put in place by President Lee, all inter-Korean communication channels were cut off; in addition, the North countered the effects of South Korea's 5.24 measures by enhancing economic relations with China and insisting that the Cheonan incident was a conspiracy play at large. After North Korea's 4th nuclear test in January 2016, President Park announced the closure of the Kaesong complex in February. North Korea ironically voiced a day later that it would also close it, that all South Korean personnel would be expelled, and that the raw and subsidiary materials would not be returned. Additionally, the Panmunjom communication channel was cut off. Following this, North Korea's 5th nuclear test took place in September 2016.

## Debriefing of the 8th Yonhap News Symposium on Korean Peace: “President Yoon Suk-yeol Era: US-China-Russia Tensions - The Future of the Korean Peninsula.”

When Russia invaded Ukraine, it waited until after the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing before beginning its advance; it is predicted that North Korea may act in a similar manner by waiting until after China’s 20th Party Congress, which is scheduled to take place in the latter half of 2022, before conducting its 7th nuclear test. In addition, North Korea is closely monitoring the strong international sanctions that were implemented in response to Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. When Russia invaded Ukraine, President Putin blamed it on NATO’s harsh policies; likewise, North Korea is looking to use a similar justification when pursuing its objectives. Furthermore, Russia and China are especially willing to support Kim Jong-un with a devotion that has never seen before. Considering this, Kim’s strategy to coerce western countries into accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state is likely not going to change. It is expected that North Korea will refuse to end its provocations toward South Korea. However, it is also anticipated that North Korea will demand the release of the sanctions that have been placed against it by the UN Security Council.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The strategies of the progressive and conservative party governments differed significantly. Inter-Korean relations were stronger under former presidents from the progressive party: Kim, Roh, and Moon. Under Presidents Roh and Moon, North Korea conducted one nuclear test each and it appeared that inter-Korean relations were peaceful with reduced provocations. However, progressive party presidents mainly implemented policies that created peace on the surface-level. While South Korea was seeking peaceful inter-Korean relations, North Korea seized opportunities to deceitfully pursue further development of nuclear weapons. For example, during President Kim’s term, the US detected secret uranium enrichment facilities in North Korea, and North Korea continued to develop nuclear weapons from that point forward.

In contrast, the conservative party governments under Lee and Park took a considerably more headstrong approach by putting greater emphasis on denuclearization, thus strengthening the ROK-US alliance (Lee, 2019). However, the conservative party presidents’ approaches caused North Korea to take more military action and to terminate exchange between the two countries. Former President Lee’s priority was to acquire denuclearization and start inter-Korean commerce, and he hoped to achieve that goal through the pragmatic approach. However, the results were not close to denuclearization or maintaining an inter-Korean relationship. As listed in the previous section, North Korea’s non-nuclear attacks occurred more frequently during the two conservative party presidents’ terms. Moreover, following the 5.24 measures that were administered by President Lee after the Cheonan submarine incident and following the closure of the Kaesong complex by President Park after North Korea’s 4th nuclear test, North Korea never acknowledged that it was responsible for the initial attacks; inter-Korean relations further deteriorated. Meanwhile, South Korean citizens continuously felt threatened by North Korea’s attacks.

The policies of the conservative and progressive party governments both had benefits and drawbacks, but neither made significant progress toward the denuclearization of North Korea. While the sunshine policy from former progressive party governments led to greater surface-level peace, North Korea exploited South Korea’s peaceful policies to develop more nuclear weapons. To hinder North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, former conservative party governments implemented the pragmatic North Korea policy. However, this resulted in more non-nuclear attacks from North Korea and reduced cooperation.

Nuclear tests and nonnuclear provocative actions by North Korea point to several implications. The first is that the North is unlikely to give up its nuclear capabilities, regardless of whether the South Korean

government implements the sunshine policy or the pragmatic approach. North Korea has been developing nuclear weapons for the crucial purpose of promoting the Kim regime's security; because North Korea's nuclear weapons can reach the US mainland, the Kim regime holds great power. Although the US currently possesses 3750 nuclear weapons, which is incomparable to the 30-40 nuclear weapons that North Korea possesses, North Korea's nuclear weapons can still compromise US security (Moon, 2019).

In light of this, the most effective strategy for reducing and addressing North Korea's threats is to pursue surface-level peace through negotiations, while also building a stronger ROK-US alliance by enhancing extended deterrence. Extended deterrence, both nuclear and non-nuclear, strongly discourages North Korea from attacking the South, as it fears the consequences it would receive from the United States. The protection that the US offers to non-nuclear countries, such as South Korea, is known as the US nuclear umbrella (Lee, SH, 2013). In terms of nuclear deterrence, building a trust-based relationship with the US and strengthening the ROK-US strategic alliance are both critical to South Korea's security. As a part of the ROK-US historical nuclear alliance, US tactical nuclear weapons were deployed in South Korea from 1958 to 1991 in order to stop North Korea's nuclear development. However, during President Roh Tae-woo's term, nuclear weapons were no longer deployed following the joint declaration of denuclearization in 1991 (Park, 1994). President Yoon recently expressed that "sharing or deploying nuclear weapons with the U.S. in South Korea aren't options under consideration" (Martin & Fairclough, 2022, p.2). Therefore, protection through the US nuclear umbrella is vital for South Korea's security.

In terms of non-nuclear deterrence, advanced detection and precision strike counter-force capabilities are pivotal components in Lee's study (Lee, SH, 2013). When South Korea was experiencing several attacks from North Korea, establishment of the Korean 3-axis system was initiated by President Lee and completed by President Park. However, this system was not officially implemented until President Yoon. President Yoon discussed a detailed plan for the Korean 3-axis system in his election pledges, as described in the Results section. Additionally, former President Moon had reviewed the possibility of founding the South Korean Military Strategic Headquarters, but it was not established during his term (Jeong, 2022). President Yoon's plans for these Headquarters were mentioned in the Results section. If President Yoon pursues non-nuclear deterrence, South Korea's military defense level is anticipated to increase by the end of his term, further discouraging North Korea from additional provocations and reducing the threats that South Korean citizens feel.

Due to North Korea's unwillingness to denuclearize, humanitarian support for North Korea should be separated from its negotiations with South Korea. Building a stronger US-ROK alliance and attaining non-nuclear deterrence will be the key components for the next phase of South Korea's security. If President Yoon can achieve these, the outcome will likely be different from that of past South Korean governments.

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