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# China's Wagner on Water

How Private Security Companies Will  
Strengthen the PRC's Fishing Militia

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## China's Wagner on Water: How Private Security Companies Will Strengthen the PRC's Fishing Militia

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Elizabeth Marcus (Research Intern)

*China has equipped a maritime force of civilian fishermen to secure disputed territory and intimidate rivals in the South China Sea. However, the fishing militia has outgrown its original purpose. The fishing militia has evolved its mission set but not its organizational structure. Originally the militia performed surveillance operations while now it conducts aggressive patrols. Since the fishing militia's organizational structure has not adapted to match this shift in mission, it faces several institutional challenges that limit its effectiveness.*

*To remedy the fishing militia's organizational problems, China may integrate private security companies (PSC) into fishing militia operations. This evolution will improve the sophistication and functionality of China's fishing militia. China's PSC augmented fishing militia will enable increasingly complex operations in the South China Sea that will challenge future U.S. operations.*

### **Introduction**

China's fishing militia has played a key role in territorial disputes and power projection in the South China Sea since 1960. The fishing militia is a part-time maritime force that conducts aggressive patrols in the South China Sea. China's fishing militia has challenged the sovereignty claims of regional adversaries by testing their ability to control disputed waters. It has secured significant territorial gains by using tactics such as swarming, ramming, and surveillance operations. The fishing militia overwhelms its opponents without firing a single shot, securing economic and strategic gains for China while operating in the gray zone.

The militia has a weak command and control structure, and its members lack substantial military training, education, and political awareness. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) officers worry that the militia's unprofessionalism will lead to unintended escalation in the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup>

China can neither forgo the strategic value of the militia nor risk conflict escalation. China may seek to remedy this problem by integrating domestic maritime private security companies (PSCs)

into fishing militia operations. This integration will grow China's private security industry while strengthening militia capabilities.

## China's Fishing Militia

*"China's PAFMM (People's Armed Forces Fishing Militia) is an organization primarily comprising mariners working in the civilian economy who are trained and can be mobilized to defend and advance China's maritime territorial claims, protect 'maritime rights and interests,' and support the PLA Navy (PLAN) in wartime."*<sup>2</sup>

- Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, U.S. Naval War College

China's fishing militia conducts grey zone operations. They overwhelm and dominate their opponents by using an unconventional approach to territorial defense. However, the fishing militia has several weaknesses that threaten future Chinese operations in the region.

### PAFMM Disposition

The fishing militia uses a wide array of equipment, tactics, and vessels to harass its adversaries in the South China and East China Sea.

The general disposition of the fishing militia is as follows:

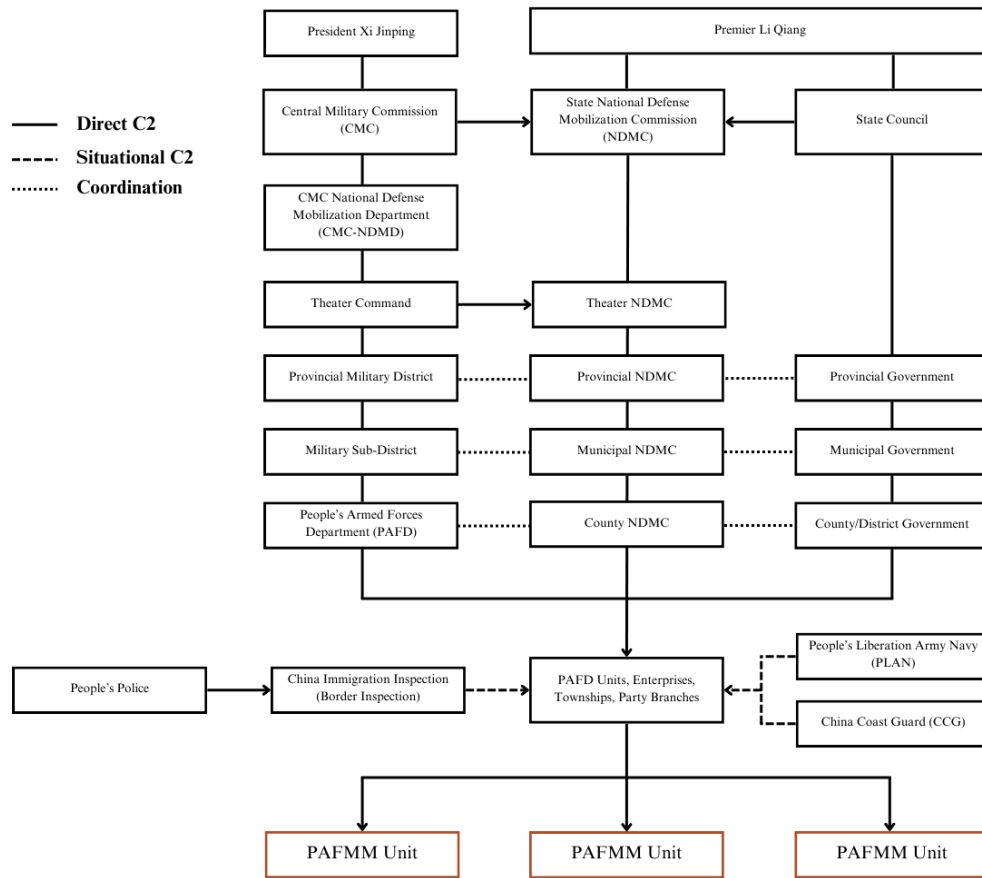
- *Multi-channeled command and control.* The fishing militia falls under the command and control of China's State National Defense Mobilization Committee (NDMC), the Central Military Commission, PLAN, Border Security Forces, and the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG).<sup>3</sup>

The National Defense Mobilization Committee directs Provincial Military Districts, which are responsible for the organization, training, and command of militia units. The Provincial Military Districts are the link between the NDMC and the county level People's Armed Forces Detachments (PAFD).<sup>4</sup>

County level PAFDs are led by active-duty People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers and are responsible for delivering missions and mobilization orders to the grassroots (local) fishing militia units.<sup>5</sup> Local fishing militia units are also known to deploy under the direction of the Chinese Border Security Forces, PLAN, and the CCG.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1, pictured below, illustrates PAFMM's command and control structure.

**Fig. 1. PAFMM Command and Control**



Fishing militia units are commanded by part-time civilian cadre that are paid by the local government.<sup>7</sup> They manage the recruiting, planning, organization, training, and operational execution of China's "little blue men." Fishing militia units are typically based out of a local state-owned fishery.<sup>8</sup>

- *Non-professional militiamen.* The militia is made up of part-time civilian volunteers. While most militiamen are fishermen, many come from diverse backgrounds such as shipbuilders, port builders, veterans, local government officials, and members of the CCP.<sup>9</sup> Militiamen typically have low education and professionalism.<sup>10</sup>
- *Mixed Fleet.* The militia deploys two types of boats: professional maritime militia fishing vessels (MMFVs) and Spratly backbone fishing vessels (SBFV).<sup>11</sup> MMFVs are specifically designed and operated using funds directed to the fishing militia. They are at least 55m long and typically have a steel hull.<sup>12</sup> SBFVs are domestic fishing vessels recruited by the government using subsidy programs to incentivize participation in the fishing militia.

- *Limited ISR equipment.* Fishing militia vessels have limited intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance equipment. Vessels are equipped with basic satellite communication terminals, shortwave radio, AIS (Automatic Identification System), GPS, maritime satellite telephones, and satellite beacons.<sup>13</sup> Fishing militiamen are restricted to visually identifying<sup>14</sup>
- *Focus on the South China Sea.* PAFMM units are based out of fisheries in Guangdong Province, Hainan Province, and Sansha City. The militia is most active in areas of the Parcel Islands, Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef, and Second St. Thomas Shoal.<sup>15</sup>

### PAFMM: Enabling Incremental Expansion

*“Wearing camouflage means you are a qualified soldier, taking off camouflage means you are a law-abiding fisherman.”*

- Zhang Haitong, chinanews.com

The fishing militia uses its civilian status to operate in the gray zone, allowing China to expand its territory without facing international repercussions. The militia is a unique and important actor in China’s national security strategy.

The strengths of China’s fishing militia are as follows:

- *Disguised operations.* The PAFMM’s civilian appearance and its selective use of AIS equipment disorient commanders of foreign vessels. This decreases the reaction time for foreign commanders and enables the PAFMM to conduct offensive maneuvers, increasing the risk of accidental escalation by foreign commanders.
- *Plausible deniability.* Although the fishing militia falls under the authority of the PLA, PLAN, and government mobilization authorities, its categorization as a part-time civilian organization allows China to deny authority over the PAFMM during confrontations with foreign entities.<sup>16</sup>
- *Territorial expansion.* China has seized foreign territory without facing international consequences by deploying the militia rather than PLAN or CCG. Currently, the militia has secured Chinese control over the Spratly Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and Second Thomas Shoal.

## PAFMM: An Unwieldy Force

*“PLA commanders and officers have openly discussed the problems who commands the militia forces, under what circumstances, and what authorization; who is authorized to review and approve the maritime militia’s participation in what types of maritime rights protection operations; and who is responsible for militia expenditures.”*

- Shuxian Luo and Johnathan G. Panter, Army University Press

The fishing militia has several weaknesses that challenge its mission readiness. The militia’s weak command-and-control structure, lack of PLAN authority, and poor training and education of recruits increase the risk of unintentional escalation. These weaknesses are the source of future adaptations to the militia’s organizational structure and mission set.

The weaknesses of the fishing militia are as follows:

- *Decentralized and disorganized command structure.* The fishing militia falls under the command of multiple state military and civilian organizations, as previously illustrated. Command of the militia is inconsistent across provinces and cities and arises from multiple channels of competing authority. Additionally, the PAFMM has its own internal C2 structure, and its vessels have freedom of execution and maneuver in the South China Sea. Chinese Navy officers have expressed concerns regarding deployment of the militia and urged for standardization of the militia’s C2 structure.<sup>17</sup>
- *Lack of PLAN operational control.* China recognizes that the PAFMM’s decentralized command and control risks accidental escalation in the South China Sea. While militiamen fall under the command of a civilian cadre member, they are not bound under the same oath of duty as PLAN sailors due to their part time, unofficial status.<sup>18</sup> As a result, fishing militiamen have inadequately responded to their duties as directed by civilian cadre.<sup>19</sup>

Surveys conducted in Hainan Province reported that 42% of fishermen prioritized profits over their participation in the fishing militia.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, fishermen have used their maritime militia status to access illegal fishing areas, which led to the Scarborough Shoal standoff between China and the Philippines in 2012.<sup>21</sup> The militia vessels involved in the confrontation initially acted as civilian fishing vessels operating for profit in the area, and were not on militia orders. The vessels began to operate aggressively as maritime militia vessels once Philippine ships began to approach the shoal. This incident highlights the lack of situational oversight of fishing militia units which risks escalation.

- *Inadequate training.* The lack of training, education, and political awareness among the militiamen risks accidental escalation. Political director of the Sansha maritime security division cautioned that the militia’s “inadequate political awareness and professionalism” makes its sailors “unfit for the complex situation surrounding the South China Sea rights and interests struggle.”<sup>22</sup>



The militia's weaknesses raise questions about the militia's ability to benefit the PRC in future South China Sea conflict.<sup>23</sup> The CCP will seek to eliminate these weaknesses by adapting the militia's structure and command.

## **The Future of China's Fishing Militia: The Growing Role of PSCs**

The PRC may integrate Chinese maritime private security companies (PSCs) into the fishing militia to eliminate the militia's weaknesses in command and control, professionalism, and training. Chinese maritime private security companies may be used to strengthen and expand maritime militia operations in the South China Sea.

China will impose its national security burden on commercial and civil organizations as tensions rise in the region. The maritime militia and private security companies will increase in relevance and ability in the future.

### Contracting out the Gray Zone: A PSC-Enabled Fishing Militia

Chinese maritime private security companies may be used to support future militia operations. Maritime PSCs are a subset of the private security industry; not all PSCs provide maritime services. Chinese maritime private security companies are contracted by Chinese firms to provide services in armed maritime escort, piracy protection, overseas residence protection, overseas security training, and risk assessment.<sup>24</sup> They also provide intelligence services to the Chinese government.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, maritime PSCs also provide fishing protection services to Chinese state-owned fisheries.<sup>26</sup>

While maritime PSCs operate primarily abroad, they are headquartered in ports along the South China Sea and provide services in the South China Sea. Chinese maritime private security companies recruit from amphibious units of the PLA and former PLAN soldiers.<sup>27</sup> Zhongjun Junhong Security Group, a prominent Chinese security company, described its maritime private security operations as small teams of 3-4 people, with each member equipped with either a semi-automatic or automatic rifle and 450 rounds of ammunition.<sup>28</sup>

China's private security industry has grown substantially since the early 2000s and will continue to receive substantial state investment in the future. The once infant industry has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar RMB industry with companies of various sizes and operational skillsets. The CCP is required to maintain a holding in all PSCs, but the party maintains complete control of the largest PSC - Frontier Services Group – which is a publicly listed, state owned enterprise.<sup>29</sup> PSC-militia integration will enhance the capabilities and operational scale of both organizations. Maritime PSCs will be used to consolidate the militia's command and control under a single authority, improve training, and increase the sophistication of militia operations. This achieves multiple desired outcomes for the CCP – to decrease the militia's risk of unintended escalation, and to expand the PRC's private security industry.

Private security companies will strengthen militia operations in the following ways:

- *Consolidated militia command and control.* Maritime private security companies can simplify the fishing militia's current command and control structure by consolidating it under a single entity, rather than the current structure which contains multiple channels of command input from Chinese civil and military organizations. For China, this will decrease the risk of unintended escalation.
- *Increased professionalism and better oversight.* PSCs can also provide professional oversight to militia operations. The PLA and PLAN are primarily concerned with the lack of professionalism and education within the PAFMM, stemming from the militiamen's prioritization of financial gains over militia duties.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, maritime private security contractors are full time employees with career experience in naval operations.<sup>31</sup> They surpass militiamen in quality and quantity of training in maritime tactics and security. The CCP may trust PSCs over the PAFMM to oversee militia operations or conduct missions on their own.

### China's Expanding Non-State Security Apparatus

*"Given China's growing global economic and diplomatic engagement, the Chinese government will increasingly rely on private security companies, whatever its reservations. Beijing clearly does not want to replicate the Russian experience, but it remains to be seen how effectively it can keep control over this growing industry."*<sup>32</sup>

- Alessandro Arduino, War on the Rocks

Developments in China's national security sphere indicate a high likelihood China will integrate the fishing militia with private security companies. Increasingly, Chinese resources and policies are being directed towards private security companies and the fishing militia alike, indicating these organizations have a growing role in Chinese national security.

These developments suggest China will pursue a PSC-augmented fishing militia:

- *China is increasing its non-traditional maritime defense.* China's Global Security Initiative, published in February 2023, states that China aims to "improve governance capacity in the domain of non-traditional security," and to "tackle transnational crimes at sea including piracy and armed robbery, so as to jointly safeguard maritime tranquility and sea lane security." The 2023 United States Department of Defense Annual Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China suggests that China is actively pursuing this goal by allocating resources towards the fishing militia. The report states that militia units operating in the Spratly Islands and South China Sea received increased funding from the government to "grow their maritime capabilities and ranks of personnel."<sup>33</sup>

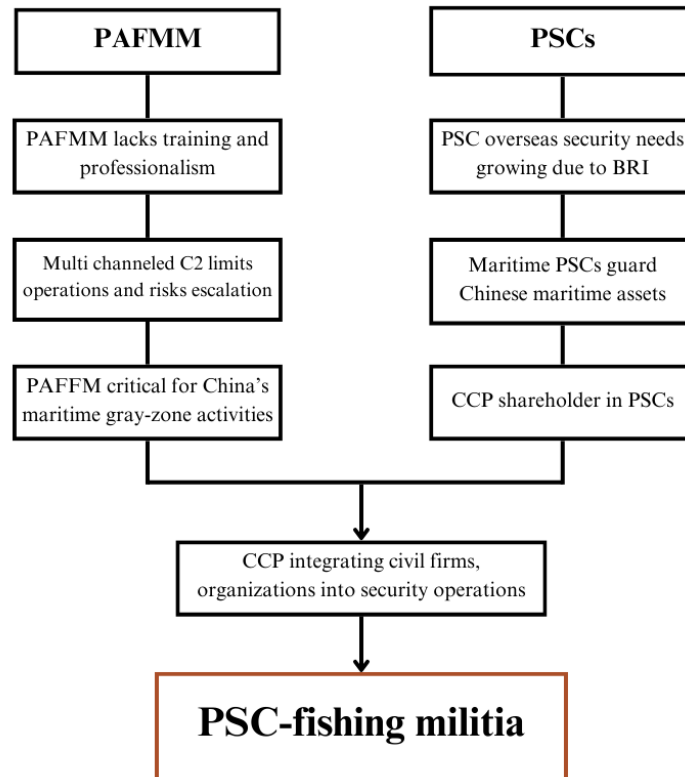
- *China's private security sector is growing at a rapid rate.* China's private security has since grown into a global multi-billion-dollar RMB industry in the last twenty years.<sup>34</sup> China has historically been apprehensive to invest in private security companies to maintain "party control of the gun."<sup>35</sup> However, China's Belt and Road Initiative required a shift in stance to protect Chinese assets abroad without establishing a formal military presence.

China's largest private security company, Frontier Services Group, was established in 2021 by former CEO of Blackwater Worldwide, Erik Prince, and is modeled off Blackwater.<sup>36</sup> Frontier Services Group is a publicly listed state-owned enterprise. As the CCP continues to allocate more resources to non-state security actors, private security companies will make up a larger portion of China's total civilian and military defense forces.

- *Integration of Chinese military and commercial sectors.* Dozens of Chinese state-owned companies have established People's Armed Forces Detachments (PAFDs), which serve as corporate militia brigades.<sup>37</sup> PAFDs resemble Mao-era militias and support PLA recruitment and training. This signals that the CCP's growing concerns over national security increase China's reliance on private security actors to ensure total defense coverage and suggests the PRC will continue to pursue civil-military integration.
- *China contracts fishing militia missions to the commercial sector.* China recently began outsourcing militia activities to commercial firms. The 2023 DoD Report states that the CCP "subsidizes various local and provincial commercial organizations to operate [Chinese Maritime Militia] vessels to perform 'official' missions on an ad hoc basis outside of their regular civilian commercial activities."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the CCP will likely outsource militia operations to PSCs in the future as they pursue nationwide civil-military integration.
- *Maritime private security companies provide protective services for Chinese fisheries.* Zhongjun Junhong, one of China's private security companies, includes in its list of services "global security and maritime escort and fishery protective services."<sup>39</sup> Zhongjun Junhong has offices in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. Given that China's fishing militia has multiple base ports in the nearby Guangdong province, it is likely that Zhongjun Junhong has coordinated operations with the fishing militia.<sup>40</sup> A connection between private security companies and the fishing militia has already been established and will likely grow in the future to include joint ventures with the two organizations.

Figure 2, pictured below, illustrates the current operational paths of the fishing militia and private security companies, and demonstrates how each organization's independent developments will lead the PRC to pursue PSC-militia integration.

**Fig. 2 Integration of PAFMM and PSCs**



### **Enhanced Capability and Muddying the Waters**

The PSC-militia will be a complex new actor in the South China Sea and Taiwan. It will increase the risk of escalation and complicate the movement and operations of United States forces in the region. The militia will use unconventional approaches to undermine the efforts of the United States to contain China's expansion in the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Encounters with the fishing militia will increase as tensions rise in the South China Sea. It is critical that the United States recognizes the growing presence of China's fishing militia and private security companies in the South China Sea, and how these organizations may develop in the future. Military commanders must be prepared for confrontation with PSCs and the PAFMM.

### New Capabilities and Threats

Private security companies supporting militia operations will introduce new capabilities, equipment, and weaponry that will threaten the United States and allies in the region. The fishing

militia will be able to grant access to denied areas, intimidate foreign actors, and improve Chinese intelligence.

The new capabilities a PSC-augmented militia may possess are as follows:

- *Improved intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).* Current vessels do not possess advanced sensors or imagery equipment, and the PAFMM is restricted to visually identifying its opponents. PSCs could improve the militia's ISR capabilities by improving data/intelligence collection, operating advanced sensors, and leading reconnaissance missions. A PSC augmented fishing militia may seek contact with U.S. vessels to collect intelligence on U.S. capabilities and tactics.
- *Introducing unmanned vehicles.* Private security companies could operate UAVs and USVs to support militia operations. UAVs and USVs may be used in large numbers to overwhelm the enemy and to grant the PRC access to denied spaces. This would amplify the militia's swarming tactics it already uses to intimidate foreign commanders.
- *Diversifying vessels and tactics.* PAFMM vessels are large and slow and are used to swarm or ram into enemy ships. PSCs could introduce smaller boats to support fishing militia operations and maneuver quickly around enemy vessels to distract and confuse foreign commanders.

A PSC-enabled militia's new capabilities will increase the risk of both intentional and unintentional escalation between the United States and China. China will continue to use asymmetric means to threaten U.S. operations. It is imperative that the United States recognizes the adaptability of the PAFMM and prepares its commanders for contact with the militia.

### PSC-Militia Complicates Taiwan Operations

The militia today primarily operates in the South China Sea. A PSC-augmented militia will have the sophistication, equipment, and experience necessary to expand operations to Taiwan. The PSC-militia's gray zone operations in the Taiwan Strait will increase the risk of escalation. Its status as hostile non-state actor introduces additional complexity to an already complicated and high-risk situation between the PRC and Taiwan. This section illustrates the effect of PSC-militia operations in the Taiwan Strait.

The Taiwan Strait is the main shipping route between the United States, China, Japan, and Europe.<sup>41</sup> It is heavily congested with merchant and civilian ships and has territorial claims by both the PRC and Taiwan.<sup>42</sup> These ships will be the target of PSC-militia operations and subjected to swarming, ramming, and blocking tactics. Taiwan, the United States, and other affected states will demand justice. China will deny the existence of the maritime militia and any PRC affiliation with the organization. PAFMM harassment in the Taiwan Strait will become increasingly audacious and reinforce China's dominance in the region. The introduction of a PSC-militia adds complexity to a highly trafficked and contested territory, drastically increasing the chance of unintentional escalation between China and Taiwan.

Improved PAFFM vessels will possess new ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) capabilities such as advanced sensors and unmanned vehicles. Possession of these sensors signals to US and Taiwan forces that the militia is a combatant.<sup>43</sup> The United States and Taiwan will contest the militia's status as a non-state actor, but China will continually deny association with the militia. The United States and Taiwan will navigate a murky situation in the Taiwan Strait as they gain contact with the PSC-militia. They must recognize the potential for militia confrontation within the Strait and respond to conflict in a matter that does not provide China the opportunity to increase escalation.

It is crucial that the United States acknowledges the PSC-militia as a threatening new development that complicates operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan. The United States must devise specific strategies to counter militia and private security company activity and deny Chinese expansion in the region.

## Conclusion

China's fishing militia is a gray zone actor used to secure contested territory in the South China Sea and intimidate rivals. It has several weaknesses that will be the foundation of future adaptations to the militia's structure and operations. China may integrate maritime private security companies into the fishing militia to bolster its capabilities. Recent developments show that as China integrates its civil and military sectors, private security companies have gained a larger role in China's approach to national security. The importance of the fishing militia and private security companies in China's defense strategy is expected to increase as tensions rise in the South China Sea.

A PSC-augmented fishing militia will be able to operate advanced weaponry and sensors, expanding the scope of militia operations. This will threaten United States and ally forces in the region by increasing the risk of escalation and complexity in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

It is critical the United States recognizes the threat that China's fishing militia and private security companies present. These asymmetric security forces will continue to adapt and undermine the efforts of the United States to limit Chinese expansion South China Sea and Taiwan.

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