Balancing Alliance Commitments and Strategic Autonomy: A Study on the Domestic Political Logic of the Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's Strengthening of the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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Abstract. Since the inauguration of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration in 2022, South Korea's foreign strategy has shifted from "strategic ambiguity" to "strategic clarity," marked by a comprehensive strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance through measures such as upgrading military cooperation, promoting historical reconciliation with Japan, and joining the "Chip 4 Alliance." This abrupt policy change stands in stark contrast to the preceding Moon Jae-in administration. Existing research struggles to fully explain this "rupture-like" adjustment. This paper, based on a three-layer "Structure-Cognition-Strategy" analytical model, dissects the domestic political logic within South Korea. At the structural level, the interest demands of the "politico-business-military" complex and institutional path dependence provide the material and institutional foundation. At the cognitive level, conservative ideology, "values-based diplomacy," and specific security perceptions define the policy direction. At the strategic level, the politicization of issues within political competition and the mobilization of public opinion through "external threat" narratives clear the path for policy implementation. The study shows that the interaction and self-reinforcement of these three domestic political mechanisms are the core drivers behind the Yoon administration's alliance-strengthening policy. The "Structure-Cognition-Strategy" model constructed herein not only enriches research on the strategic choices of middle powers but also provides empirical reference for related countries in formulating policies towards South Korea.

Keywords: Yoon Suk Yeol Administration, Domestic Politics, Three-Layer Analytical Model, Strategic Adjustment.

1. Introduction

In May 2022, following the inauguration of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration, South Korea's foreign and security policies underwent a significant "rupture-like" adjustment: completely abandoning the "strategic ambiguity" of the Moon Jae-in era and shifting towards "strategic clarity." Against a backdrop where the security structure in Northeast Asia had not undergone fundamental change, the competitive dynamic between China’s mainland and the U.S. had not been overturned, and the North Korean nuclear issue remained relatively stable, South Korea nonetheless comprehensively strengthened the U.S.-ROK alliance, actively promoted South Korea-Japan reconciliation and trilateral cooperation, and joined the U.S.-led "Chip 4 Alliance" within a short period. This abrupt change highlights the crucial role of regime change, a domestic political variable, challenging the mainstream International Relations theory of "systemic determinism," which emphasizes the decisive nature of the external environment. The breaking of policy inertia indicates that domestic government turnover and shifts in strategic preferences can lead to profound reconstruction of foreign policy, even when systemic pressures have not fundamentally altered. This case reveals the importance of unit-level factors in national decision-making, such as leaders' perceptions, camp-based ideological divides, and domestic political coalitions. Dramatic changes in domestic political processes can lead a nation's leaders to drastically redirect their country's foreign strategy, thereby demanding greater theoretical attention to the explanatory power of unit-level variables, moving beyond perspectives constrained solely by systemic factors.

Existing research on the evolution of South Korea's foreign strategy primarily follows three theoretical paths, each with explanatory limitations. First, the structural realist perspective, viewing

the state as a unitary rational actor, posits that South Korea's strategic choices are passive adaptations to the Sino-U.S. power shift and the North Korean threat. However, this perspective cannot explain why, under similar systemic pressures, the Moon Jae-in administration chose "strategic ambiguity" and engagement with North Korea, while the Yoon Suk Yeol administration decisively "chose sides" and tilted comprehensively towards the U.S. The contradiction between the constancy of systemic pressure and the abruptness of policy output exposes this paradigm's blind spots in explaining the "timing" and "degree" of policy change. Second, domestic political perspectives, while noting the influence of political transition or leadership personality, often remain descriptive, lacking a systematic analytical framework to reveal the specific interactive mechanisms among various domestic variables (e.g., interest groups, ideology, political competition). This makes it difficult to explain why domestic political changes lead to comprehensive, multi-layered restructuring of foreign and security policies. Third, some studies emphasize external agency, such as pressure or inducements from allies, but this cannot explain why South Korea's responsiveness to U.S. demands varies drastically across different periods, and where its policy initiative originates.

In summary, existing research either overly emphasizes systemic constraints while neglecting domestic agency, or, while focusing on domestic politics, lacks a clear analytical framework and dynamic mechanism analysis, making it insufficient to fully explain the strategic shift of the Yoon administration towards strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance. This paper attempts to transcend single-level or variable explanations by delving into the mediating process of domestic politics, constructing an integrated "Structure-Cognition-Strategy" three-layer analytical model. This model aims to systematically explain: at the structural level, how the interest alliances of the "politico-business-military" complex and institutional path dependence lay the material and institutional foundation for strategic adjustment; at the cognitive level, how conservative ideology, the concept of "values-based diplomacy," and specific security threat perceptions shape the overall policy direction; at the strategic level, how the ruling political force, through issue politicization and "external threat" narratives, mobilizes public opinion to remove obstacles for policy implementation. More importantly, this paper endeavors to reveal that these three levels do not operate in isolation but exist in a dynamic relationship of two-way interaction and mutual reinforcement, collectively constituting a driving system that propels policy change. To validate this analytical model, this paper will conduct in-depth case process tracing on three landmark strategic initiatives during the early governance of the Yoon administration (2022-2023): the normalization of THAAD deployment, the South Korea-Japan historical reconciliation process, and participation in the "Chip 4 Alliance." In terms of significance, this study not only contributes empirically to a deeper understanding of the roots and future trajectory of South Korea's strategic adjustment but also aims theoretically to contribute to the development of alliance politics theory by providing a new analytical perspective on middle-power proactive "alliance restructuring" through a mechanistic unpacking of the domestic political "black box."

2. Theoretical Framework: The Three-Layer Analytical Model of Domestic Politics

2.1. Structural Layer: Interest Group Alliances and Institutional Arrangements

The structural layer in domestic political analysis refers to the macro-level definition of political power distribution, patterns of interest group alliances, and institutional rules. Its core elements are the "interaction of interest group power" and the "constraining logic of institutional arrangements." Specifically, through the coalitional combinations of interest groups and institutional frameworks, the structural layer shapes the basic "power structure" of domestic political decision-making, serving as the "structural constraint conditions" for policy choices. For South Korea, its structural layer exhibits dual characteristics: "conservative-progressive camp interest alliance division + executive dominance under the presidential system." On the one hand, Korean interest groups have long formed opposing alliances around the "pro-U.S. conservative camp" and the "progressive reform camp," with the waxing and waning of power between these two camps directly influencing the orientation of

foreign policy. On the other hand, South Korea's presidential system grants the executive branch relatively high decision-making autonomy, but legislative checks from its legislature and judicial review by the Constitutional Court constitute institutional constraints, requiring interest groups to participate in politics through the dual channels of "lobbying the executive branch + influencing the legislative agenda."

Theoretically, the logic of South Korea's structural layer's "interest alliance-institutional arrangement" can be illustrated through the policy case of "strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance." In terms of interest alliances, South Korea's chaebols (e.g., Samsung, Hyundai) and the defense industry association have long been core forces of the "pro-U.S. alliance." Chaebols rely on the U.S. market and technological cooperation, while the defense industry depends on U.S.-ROK military contracts. This interest alignment provides inherent support for strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance when conservative administrations are in power. In terms of institutional arrangements, under South Korea's presidential system, if the president enjoys majority support in its legislature (as with the Yoon administration and the People Power political group), legislation related to alliance strengthening (such as revisions to the U.S.-ROK Missile Guidelines) can be rapidly advanced. In contrast, when progressive administrations are in power, checks from progressive political groups in the Assembly can delay the progress of similar policies. This case confirms the core role of the structural layer: the alliance preferences of interest groups form the "interest base" of policy, while institutional arrangements serve as the "implementation channel." Together, they constitute the structural framework for domestic political decision-making.

As the "foundational dimension" of the three-layer analytical model of domestic politics, the core of the structural layer is the interaction between interest group alliances and institutional arrangements. For South Korea, the division between conservative and progressive camps and the executive-dominant presidential system jointly shape the structural constraints on its foreign policy. Analysis of this dimension requires combining the alliance patterns of interest actors with the actual operation of institutional rules to clearly present the underlying influence of domestic politics on foreign policy.

2.2. Cognitive Layer: Shaping by Ideology and Security Perceptions

The Yoon Suk Yeol team holds a steadfast conservative belief system. Its ideology and security perceptions are deeply influenced by the long-standing political traditions of South Korea's conservative camp, while also being closely related to its own upbringing and political experience. These cognitive factors provide the ideological foundation and value orientation for the Yoon administration's strategic choice to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance.

The Yoon administration positions "values-based diplomacy" as a core diplomatic discourse, closely binding South Korea's state interests with the solidarity of the "liberal democratic camp." From the perspective of the Yoon team, the international community faces a confrontation between "democracy and authoritarianism." As a "democratic nation" in Northeast Asia, South Korea should strengthen cooperation with "democratic allies" like the U.S. and Japan to jointly uphold "democratic values" and the international order. This ideological positioning leads the Yoon administration to view the U.S.-ROK alliance not merely as a military and security cooperation partnership but as a core bond within the "democratic camp." Regarding China’s mainland policy, driven by this ideological bias, the Yoon administration exhibits significantly increased strategic distrust towards China’s mainland. It perceives China’s mainland's development as a threat to the "democratic camp," believing that South Korea's adherence to "strategic ambiguity" could lead to isolation within the "democratic camp," thereby harming its own security and interests.

In terms of security perceptions, the Yoon administration champions the concept of "extended deterrence," viewing U.S. military power as the central pillar of South Korea's security. The Yoon team believes that North Korea's nuclear threat and missile technology development constitute the foremost security challenge for South Korea, and that South Korea's own military capabilities are insufficient to address this threat alone. Therefore, it is imperative to construct an "extended

deterrence" system by strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance, leveraging U.S. nuclear and conventional deterrence forces to counter North Korea's "provocations."

2.3. Strategic Layer: Political Competition and Political Narrative Mobilization

Within South Korea's intense political landscape, to consolidate its ruling position and facilitate policy implementation, the Yoon administration skillfully applies issue ownership theory by politicizing security issues and constructing specific political narratives to mobilize and rally domestic public opinion, thereby clearing obstacles for its strategic choice of strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance.

The People Power political group (PPP), to which Yoon belongs as a relatively conservative political group, differs significantly from the Democratic political group of Korea (DPK) in ideology and policy positions. In the 2022 presidential election, Yoon was elected largely with the support of conservative voters. However, his approval ratings have fluctuated since taking office. To boost approval and consolidate conservative political standing, the Yoon administration has made security issues a core political agenda. By seizing "ownership" of security issues, it shapes an image of being "tough and pragmatic," contrasting with the DPK's "moderate and balanced" approach. On issues like South Korea-Japan historical reconciliation and THAAD normalization, the Yoon administration deliberately emphasizes the "security" and "forward-looking" nature of its policies, criticizing the DPK's stance as "weak and ineffectual" and "detrimental to state interests," thereby appealing to conservative voters and attracting attention from moderates.

3. Empirical Validation: Policy Output under the Interaction of Multi-Layer Variables

3.1. Decision on THAAD System Normalization (2022-2023)

The normalization of the THAAD system is one of the landmark measures by the Yoon administration to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance. The formulation and implementation of this decision resulted from the interaction and synergistic effects of variables across the structural, cognitive, and strategic layers.

At the structural level, lobbying networks of the defense industry interest groups and security bureaucracies played a crucial role. South Korean defense enterprises have long viewed the deployment and normalization of THAAD as a significant opportunity to expand business and enhance technological capabilities. After the Yoon administration took office, core defense companies such as Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) and Hyundai Heavy Industries jointly established the "Defense Industry Revitalization Committee," specifically tasked with lobbying the government on relevant policies. This committee submitted reports like the *Report on the Role of THAAD Normalization in Promoting the Defense Industry* to the Presidential Office and the Defense Ministry, detailing the positive impact of THAAD deployment on technological R&D, production capacity expansion, and export growth for defense firms, while promising to allocate part of the profits to enhancing South Korea's defense capabilities.

At the cognitive level, the Yoon administration's firm belief in "extended deterrence" and strategic distrust of China’s mainland shaped its policy preference for THAAD normalization. The Yoon team believed that North Korea's multiple missile tests between 2022-2023, with their increasing range and accuracy, posed a serious threat to South Korea's state security. The THAAD system, as an advanced missile defense system capable of intercepting North Korea's short- and medium-range missiles, was seen as a key component in building an "extended deterrence" system.

At the strategic level, the Yoon administration capitalized on North Korea's frequent missile tests to mobilize domestic public support for THAAD normalization by intensifying security threat rhetoric and guiding media discourse. Following North Korea's multiple ballistic and cruise missile tests since 2022, the Yoon administration promptly responded by releasing information through

official channels and inviting military experts to interpret the threat level, amplifying the perceived security risks to South Korea. Concurrently, the government conducted large-scale polls, publicizing results indicating "overwhelming public support for THAAD normalization" through the media to create an atmosphere of "nationwide support."

3.2. South Korea-Japan Historical Reconciliation Process (2023)

In 2023, the Yoon administration proactively pushed for South Korea-Japan historical reconciliation through a series of diplomatic initiatives to improve bilateral relations. This process similarly resulted from the interaction of the three layers, underpinned by profound domestic political logic.

At the structural level, the economic imperative of semiconductor supply chain integration was the core driver for promoting historical reconciliation. South Korea's semiconductor industry holds a significant position in the global market but is highly dependent on Japan for core materials and components. Japan commands over 90% of the global market share for critical semiconductor materials like photoresists and hydrogen fluoride, with South Korean giants like Samsung and SK Hynix heavily reliant on Japanese supplies. Japan's 2019 export restrictions on semiconductor materials to South Korea triggered a severe crisis for the Korean industry, highlighting the importance of supply chain stability. With intensifying global semiconductor competition, Korean firms urgently needed to strengthen cooperation with Japanese companies to ensure supply chain stability and security. Achieving this required the South Korean government to improve relations with Japan, shelving historical disputes to create a favorable political environment for corporate cooperation.

At the cognitive level, the Yoon administration prioritized "liberal democratic camp solidarity." Its "values-based diplomacy" provided ideological support for reconciliation. The Yoon team believed that within the current international structure characterized by a "democracy vs. authoritarianism" divide, South Korea and Japan, as "democratic nations" in Northeast Asia, should enhance cooperation to jointly uphold the interests of the "democratic camp." Reconciliation was seen not only to improve bilateral cooperation but also to strengthen the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation mechanism, thereby bolstering the "democratic camp's" influence in the region.

At the strategic level, the Yoon administration employed a "future-oriented" political narrative to downplay domestic resistance stemming from historical disputes. Simultaneously, it sought to enhance approval ratings by projecting an image of pragmatic leadership. Historical issues have long been a core obstacle in bilateral relations, with significant domestic opposition in South Korea, particularly from victims of Japanese forced wartime labor and their family’s demanding apology and compensation. To reduce domestic resistance, the Yoon administration proposed the principle of "separating historical issues from future cooperation," emphasizing that reconciliation was "for the benefit of future generations" and urging the public to "let go of historical grievances and focus on future development." Additionally, Yoon, through meetings and signing agreements with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, crafted an image of being a "pragmatic and decisive" leader, signaling to the public the government's capability to handle complex diplomatic issues.

3.3. Decision to Participate in the "Chip 4 Alliance" (2022-2023)

The Yoon administration's active push for South Korea's participation in the U.S.-led "Chip 4 Alliance" in 2022-2023 resulted from the combined effects of structural-level interest drivers, cognitive-level ideological support, and strategic-level public mobilization. This decision reflects the profound influence of domestic politics on South Korea's foreign economic and security policy.

At the structural level, the technological dependence and market considerations of semiconductor chaebols like Samsung and SK were the core drivers pushing for participation. While South Korea's semiconductor industry holds global leadership in manufacturing, it is highly dependent on the U.S. for chip design, core equipment, and raw materials. The U.S. possesses the world's most advanced chip design technology and equipment manufacturing capabilities. For Korean firms to maintain technological leadership, close cooperation with U.S. companies is essential. Concurrently, the U.S.

is one of the largest semiconductor markets globally, and Korean firms heavily depend on it. With intensifying U.S.-China’s mainland tech competition and tightening U.S. controls on semiconductor technology exports, Korean companies face dual risks of supply chain disruption and market access limitations. Participation in the "Chip 4 Alliance" would grant Korean firms access to U.S. technological support and market assurances, avoiding exclusion from the global high-end semiconductor supply chain.

At the cognitive level, the Yoon administration constructed discourses of "techno-securitization" and "democratic supply chains," framing participation as a necessary choice to secure South Korea's semiconductor industry. The Yoon team viewed global semiconductor competition not merely as economic rivalry but as "institutional competition" and "security competition." China’s mainland's rapid development in the semiconductor field was perceived as a threat to the technological edge of the "democratic camp." Non-participation could risk technological "chokepoints," thereby affecting state economic and security interests.

At the strategic level, the Yoon administration defined participation as a "necessary choice in the face of institutional competition." It employed media campaigns and policy explanations to convey the importance of joining the alliance, garnering public support. The government released a *White Paper on Semiconductor Industry Security* outlining the "technological security threats" faced by the industry and the positive role of alliance participation in securing the industry and promoting economic development. It also organized public forums with industry leaders and experts to explain the alliance's operations and cooperation prospects, enhancing public understanding and acceptance.

4. Mechanism Analysis: Interaction Patterns of the Three Layers and Policy Cycle

The Yoon administration's strategic choice to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance is not the result of a single variable but stems from the mutual influence and bidirectional interaction among the structural, cognitive, and strategic layers. This interaction forms an organic whole driving South Korea's foreign strategic adjustment.

The structural layer provides the material base and institutional environment for the cognitive layer, profoundly influencing the formation of the Yoon team's conservative belief system and security perceptions. The interest structure of South Korea's "politico-business-military" complex determines the interests of core groups like the defense industry and semiconductor chaebols, creating large interest groups that exert pressure on and lobby the government, thereby influencing foreign policy leanings. Specifically, the economic and security demands of these groups are transmitted to the ruling elite through political lobbying and policy participation, encouraging the Yoon team's formation of a "pro-U.S., militaristic" conservative ideology that sees alliance strengthening as central to safeguarding both interest group and state interests. The cognitive layer, in turn, guides strategic choices, providing direction and justification for the Yoon administration's political narratives and public mobilization. The Yoon team's conservative ideology and security perceptions determine the government's prioritization of politicizing security issues and utilizing "external threat" narratives in political competition. As the government views the U.S.-ROK alliance as the "core measure to ensure state security" and perceives China’s mainland and North Korea as primary threats, its policy propaganda deliberately amplifies external threats, creating an atmosphere of "state crisis" to mobilize public support. Successful implementation at the strategic layer reinforces the structural layer, further consolidating the interest structure and institutional foundation of the "politico-business-military" complex. Thus, the structural and strategic layers form an interacting closed loop, which, through repeated cognitive-level reinforcement and depiction, ultimately shapes the long-term political spectrum and foreign policy choices of specific Korean groups and political forces. For the Yoon administration, its political narratives and public mobilization successfully advanced policies like THAAD normalization, yielding substantial economic benefits for interest groups. This satisfaction strengthens the groups' support for the administration, creating tighter interest binding.

Furthermore, the Yoon administration's strategic adjustment has formed a self-reinforcing policy cycle consisting of four interlinked and mutually reinforcing stages: interest drive, ideological legitimization, political narrative mobilization, and policy entrenchment, continuously deepening the U.S.-ROK alliance. The first stage is interest drive, where structural-level interest group demands provide the initial impetus. Core groups like the defense industry and semiconductor chaebols lobby the government to strengthen the alliance to protect their economic and security interests. The second stage is ideological legitimization, where cognitive-level ideology provides legitimacy. The Yoon administration translates interest group demands into "state interest" and "democratic cause" through discourses like "values-based diplomacy" and "democratic camp solidarity." The third stage is political narrative mobilization, where strategic-level narratives clear obstacles for policy implementation. The administration employs narratives of "external threat" and "state interest" to shape public perception and garner support.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study, focusing on the Yoon administration's strategic choice to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance, constructs a "Structure-Cognition-Strategy" three-layer analytical model to deeply analyze the domestic political logic behind this strategic adjustment. The research finds that the Yoon administration's policy is not merely a passive response to external systemic pressure but the result of the combined, synergistic effects of domestic political mechanisms across structural, cognitive, and strategic layers. The structural layer, through interest group alliances and institutional arrangements, provides the material base and institutional guarantees. Under a conservative administration, the interest structure of the "politico-business-military" complex means groups like the defense industry and semiconductor chaebols see alliance strengthening as vital for protecting their interests; institutional path dependence within the security bureaucracy further reinforces this policy inclination. The cognitive layer, through ideology and worldview, determines the direction. The Yoon team's conservative beliefs, "values-based diplomacy," commitment to "extended deterrence," and perception of external threats lead it to view alliance strengthening as the core path to safeguarding state security and development interests. The strategic layer, through political competition and political narratives, creates the public opinion conditions for strategic adjustment.

By constructing the "Structure-Cognition-Strategy" model, this study not only makes theoretical contributions but also offers policy insights for practice. For neoclassical realism, it complements the specific mechanisms through which domestic political variables affect foreign policy, opening the "black box" of domestic politics. It decomposes domestic politics into structural, cognitive, and strategic dimensions, detailing how variables like interest group alliances, institutional arrangements, ideology, and political narratives interact to influence foreign policy formulation and implementation. This framework clearly reveals *how* domestic politics influences foreign policy, addressing neoclassical realism's shortcomings in analyzing domestic political mechanisms, providing empirical support and theoretical supplementation. In terms of alliance politics theory, it expands the perspective on the renegotiation of rights and obligations within alliances. Traditional theory often focuses on major-major or major-minor power dynamics, emphasizing systemic pressure and major power leadership. This study uses the U.S.-ROK alliance to analyze how a middle power proactively adjusts its rights and obligations with a major power ally through domestic political maneuvering. The Yoon administration, through strengthening domestic interest group alliances, shaping ideological consensus, and mobilizing public opinion, actively deepens the alliance with the U.S., seeking a more favorable position and benefits within the alliance.

Empirically, the study's conclusions offer practical guidance for other countries' foreign policy formulation. It shows that domestic politics plays a central role in the strategic choices of middle powers; their foreign strategies are not entirely passive reactions to external environments. Domestic political factors can actively shape strategic choices. This insight challenges traditional IR theory's perception of middle power "passivity," emphasizing domestic political agency. The three-layer

model provides a clear, systematic analytical framework for understanding the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy. By decomposing domestic politics into three interrelated dimensions, it comprehensively reveals interactive mechanisms, avoiding the limitations of single-variable or holistic explanations. This framework is not only applicable to the Korean case but can serve as a reference for studying other countries' foreign policies, offering methodological value. Specifically, endogenous factors in Korean political landscape—such as the foreign policy divide between conservatives and progressives, institutional checks from its legislature, and public opinion—are often subordinated to "external environmental constraints." This analysis demonstrates that the Yoon administration's sustained strategic shift towards deepening the U.S.-ROK alliance is not a stopgap measure under external pressure but an inevitable outcome driven by domestic political logic. First, the People Power political group under Yoon needs the issue of "strengthening security ties with the U.S." to consolidate support from conservative voters and offset its shortcomings in public livelihood governance. Second, the periodic escalation of the North Korean nuclear issue and fluctuations in regional security perceptions amplify domestic "security-first" public sentiment, providing legitimacy for the government's alliance-strengthening policy. This internal political logic makes the Yoon administration's strategic adjustment significantly endogenous and inevitable.

This study has limitations that require further refinement in future research. First, the dynamic process analysis of interactions among the three layers could be more detailed. While it analyzes bidirectional interactions, deeper exploration of timing, intensity changes, and critical junctures is needed. Future research could employ process-tracing methods for more granular analysis of policy formulation and implementation. Second, the study does not fully consider the impact of other international systemic factors on South Korea's domestic politics and foreign policy. Future research could incorporate international factors (e.g., U.S. strategic inducements, Chinese policy responses, regional security dynamics) into the framework to explore their interaction with domestic variables. Third, the model's generalizability beyond the Korean case needs further testing. Future research could apply the model to other middle powers like India, Brazil, or Turkey to validate and refine its applicability.

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