

MALDIVES AS CHINA'S HUMAN INTELLIGENCE (HUMINT) HUB: THE FOUR GLOBAL INITIATIVES (4GIS) FACADE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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Abstract

Amid great power competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and ongoing geopolitical turmoil related with the US-Iran war, the Maldives archipelago has surfaced as a critical arena for Beijing's strategic vision through Maritime Silk Route (MSR). Since formation of pro-China government under President Dr Mohamed Muizzu in Nov 2023, Maldives is subtly repositioning the archipelago with Chinese geopolitical interest and is now emerging as hub for its Human Intelligence (HUMINT) operations, through public diplomacy. This article analyses how Beijing leverages its Four Global Initiatives (4GIs) i.e. the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) and Global Governance Initiative (GGI), launched between 2021 and 2025 in quick succession, as calibrated tools to expand its clandestine intelligence footprint, while eroding New Delhi's influence. Looking from the prism of recent Maldives development by China through 4GIs, this study deciphers how apparently benign looking Beijing's recent global initiatives conceal a deliberate fusion of soft power and HUMINT. The article argues, how Beijing utilises benevolent looking

4GIs facade to consolidate its position in the archipelago through pro-China government, secure strategically located Maldives, stabilise the Muizzu government, normalise Pax Sinica norms and ultimately alter the archipelago into a China-centric intelligence hub that challenges U.S. containment effort in Indo –Pacific region and India’s regional primacy in its backyard.

Introduction

Amid ongoing Sino-American rivalry in Indo–Pacific region coupled with the geopolitical upheaval triggered by the US-Iran war and growing Sino-Indian competition for Indian Ocean Region (IOR) dominance, the strategically located Maldives archipelago in India’s backyard has emerged as a pivotal crucible for Beijing’s strategic realignment. The Maldives geostrategic position along critical energy sea lanes linking turbulent Persian Gulf and the Pacific, coupled with its fragile post Covid recovery and the establishment of pro-China President Mohamed Muizzu in Nov 2023 positions archipelago nation as pivotal strategic node in IOR amid intensifying competition amongst present and emerging powers. The US-Iran war escalation, epitomised by the sinking of IRIS Dena in the IOR on 4 Mar 2026 and Iranian ballistic strikes on Diego Garcia (20–21 Mar 2026), exposes the Maldives acute vulnerability to great power conflict, while amplifying China’s ‘Malacca Dilemma.’

Beijing has responded ongoing tussle by launching its Four Global Initiatives (4GIs) i.e the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) and Global Governance Initiative (GGI) in quick succession between 2021 and 2025. China’s 4GIs mark a paradigm shift from the infrastructure heavy, hardware driven model of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) toward a more inclusive form of “software” influence. This all-inclusive transition seeks to alleviate previous debt-trap criticisms of BRI through economic interdependence (GDI), security frameworks (GSI), cultural narratives (GCI) and governance norms (GGI). Under new pro-China administration of Muizzu, the reorientation from BRI to 4GIs has facilitated China in rearticulating previously challenged BRI-linked projects such as Sinamalé

Bridge and Velana International Airport expansion into strategically significant assets with potential dual-use utility. In addition, the concurrent projects such as the Greater Malé Connectivity Project, maritime accords and accelerated trade have overshadowed India-era accusations and enabled Malé to enhance China's military and civilian presence in the archipelago. Besides India's security concerns in its backyard, the increasing presence of PLA Navy (PLAN) vessels in Maldives accentuate Maldives' evolving role in the Indo-Pacific security landscape, where it intersects with frameworks of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

Despite the abundance of affordable, low-risk technological intelligence (TECHINT) options, China with the availability of world's second-largest human resource pool after India, has continued with HUMINT and has smartly blended its peculiar less risky HUMINT operations through public diplomacy with fast evolving TECHINT means. The refinement of intelligence collection through fusion of HUMINT and TECHINT has not only augmented Chinese intelligence acquisition exponentially, but has also significantly reduced detection risk and heightened ambiguity to confuse adversaries, thereby ensuring a resilient, less risky, multi-layered espionage ecosystem. As China pivots from COVID-hit BRI infrastructure to normative power via the 4GIs, this article exhibits how these frameworks institutionalise embedded HUMINT elements, transforming the Maldives into a China-centric intelligence hub that secures Beijing's maritime imperatives, stabilises the Muizzu government, normalises Pax Sinica norms and counters both US containment and India's regional hegemony.

Chinese 4 GIs: A Self-Reinforcing Global Ecosystem

Beijing's 4GIs signal a paradigm shift from the BRI toward a self-reinforcing ecosystem. This framework challenges the Western liberal order by holistically addressing global deficits: GDI forges economic dependencies, GSI fosters security-technology partnerships, GCI crafts legitimising narratives and GGI institutionalises these gains through rule-making dominance. Together, they dismantle liberal norms, swing influence from Western institutions to Beijing's state-centric model and generate cycles of material reliance, security alignment, ideological convergence and global governance

that amplify China's geopolitical leverage.¹ Chinese official narratives frame the 4GIs as an 'organic whole', with GDI laying the material foundation, GSI ensuring a peaceful environment, GCI building value agreement and GGI providing institutional assurances.² Underneath this rhetoric, Beijing advances techno-authoritarian ideas via economic leverage wherein the GDI funds digital projects like Beidou and AI to create dependencies; GSI markets surveillance tools as peacekeeping aid; GCI validates censorship as cultural sovereignty; and GGI redesign bodies like the UN while proposing parallels, such as the International Organisation for Mediation (IOMed) focused on dispute resolution through mediation.³

Unique Chinese HUMINT Operations

The fast-emerging disruptive technologies enable economical, flexible and low-risk data harvesting. Surprisingly, China creatively blend its uncharacteristic HUMINT operations with these emerging cutting-edge technologies, creating a hybrid force multiplier that intensify the influence and dominance pursued through its 4GIs. This fusion exploits HUMINT's irreplaceable strength in gleaning nuanced cultural insights beyond machine capabilities. Departing from traditional models reliant on limited specialised agents, Chinese agencies adopt a "thousand grains of sand or mosaic or human wave or citizen-spying" approach, mobilising vast numbers of Han Chinese and their diaspora abroad. Now Beijing's proficiency in fusing "societal power" elements i.e espionage, information control, industrial policy, coercion, foreign policy, military threats and technological prowess, challenges the rules-based international order.⁴

China's 4 GIs and HUMINT Operations

Rob Joyce, the National Security Agency's senior cyber security adviser while contrasting influence operations said "I kind of look at Russia as the hurricane. It comes in fast and hard. China, on the other hand, is climate change: long, slow, pervasive."⁵ This metaphor summarises Beijing's modus operandi: avoiding Russia's tactical strikes, China pursues structural transformation via its 4GIs, growing beyond the BRI to redesign global norms as remedies for perceived Western deficits. By positioning itself as a provider of global public goods, addressing growth through the GDI, peace via the

GSI, civilisational dialogue with the GCI and governance under the GGI, Beijing secures dominance surreptitiously, without raising alarms. This “boiling frog” strategy of China incrementally escalates pressure on Global South nations, nudging them from initial loans to equity Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), PLAN docking rights, security pacts and eventual full economic dependency, often goes unnoticed until turnaround proves unfeasible. As the Maldives becomes increasingly fascinated in China’s strategic web, the Muizzu government (formed in Nov 2023) in short period has shifted from resisting backlash over BRI infrastructure to embracing 4GIs-backed maritime accords, effectively normalising Chinese naval presence amid rising IOR tensions.

CHINESE 4 GIs AND HUMINT / INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN MALDIVES

Malé’s journey from debt-fuelled rage in the 2018–2023 under India-friendly President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih to ideal strategic alignment in 2026 authenticates Beijing’s incremental global strategy, demonstrating how the 4GIs excel through patient, invisible normalisation. The Maldives’ total debt surged from \$3 billion in 2018 to \$8.2 billion by March 2024, with projections exceeding \$11 billion by 2029. Out of this, \$3.4 billion is external debt and China holds 25.2% (\$1.37 billion), making it Malé’s largest bilateral creditor with China and India being the primary creditors. As per human rights advocate and freelance journalist Dimitra Staikou, Maldives’ situation mirrors a pattern seen in other nations where Chinese loans and trade agreements have led to unsustainable debt burdens.⁶ According to World Bank data, Maldives owes China \$1.37 billion, constituting approximately 40% of the country’s total public debt, which makes Beijing its largest bilateral creditor.⁷

The Sinamalé Bridge and Greater Malé Connectivity Project, once vilified as BRI “debt traps” have changed into GSI-backed maritime security hubs, while cultural institutes silently recruit local influencers under GCI cover, exemplifying how Beijing’s strategic preferences are reframed as universal human progress. “Pragmatism trumps principle” aptly describes Malé’s trajectory wherein the economic survival and strategic autonomy overshadow earlier anti-China rhetoric. Despite past accusations of debt traps, President Muizzu has surprisingly embraced Chinese equity-based FDI, PLAN warship

docking rights, tech enclaves and embedded intelligence networks, converting economic footholds into geopolitical supremacy.

By reaffirming commitment to a “community with a shared future” and signing 20 strategic cooperation agreements (including maritime security, digital infrastructure, blue economy, disaster risk reduction and trade), Malé has cemented its role in Jinping’s comprehensive architecture, securing China’s Gulf oil transits through the Malacca Strait while building pervasive espionage networks to counter Trump’s Indo-Pacific containment strategy.⁸ This shift throws out India’s traditional security hegemony, tipping the regional balance as China normalises Pax Sinica in the IOR. Malé now stands as a strategic crucible where the 4GIs converge to transform infrastructure into sophisticated HUMINT networks. Amid Hormuz disruptions from the US-Iran conflict epitomised by the sinking of IRIS Dena off Sri Lanka and Iranian ballistic strikes on Diego Garcia, the GDI drives industrial localisation in Malé, the GSI secures PLAN access against QUAD encirclement, the GCI positions China as a non-Western, South Asian civilisational partner and the GGI coordinates debt-equity conversions to lock in dependency.

GDI and Chinese HUMINT in Maldives

GDI launched at the UNGA in Sep 2021, advances the UN’s 2030 Agenda via six principles: needs-based prioritisation, people-centred development, inclusivity, innovation, ecological balance and pragmatic execution to address poverty reduction, food security, health crises, financing gaps, climate action, industrialisation, digital economy and connectivity with aim to frame China as the Global South’s advocate against Western imbalances. In quick time, the GDI gained backing from over 100 countries and organisations, with more than 80 nations in its “Group of Friends.”⁹

China has enthusiastically encouraged the Maldives’ full participation in the GDI to build a “global community with a shared future.” In Feb 2024, Chinese Ambassador Wang Lixin explicitly stated that Beijing “welcomes the participation of the Maldives in the Group of Friends of the GDI” and is “ready to work with the Maldives to speed up

implementation of projects from the GDI Project Pool” to benefit both peoples.¹⁰ Under GDI, China has prioritised blue economy cooperation, digital economy infrastructure, green development and livelihood assistance. The Action Plan for the China-Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2024–2028) clearly integrates GDI priorities with China pledging continued funding for new energy sources, infrastructure construction, agriculture, marine environmental protection and medical care, all framed as “people’s livelihood” improvements rather than strategic assets.¹¹ On 24 Dec 2025, both countries have formalised an Agreement on Development Cooperation, securing a RMB 600 million assistance package to support the Maldives’ key development priorities to include funding three flagship projects central to GDI’s infrastructure and livelihood pillars: the China–Maldives Friendship Hospital in Villimalé, road development in Malé and Villimalé and 50 Island Council buildings to strengthen local governance.¹²

During the agreement, Maldivian Minister highlighted China’s transformative role in Maldivian development, citing past contributions including housing in Hulhumalé and the Friendship Bridge and brought out that new agreement will advance the people-centred framework of China’s GDI, deepening bilateral cooperation in infrastructure, healthcare and administrative capacity-building.¹³ Critically, GDI’s Project Pool has accelerated implementation of dual-use projects: the Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) Agricultural Economic Zone (managed by a Chinese firm China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd (CHEC) with PLA South China Sea militarisation history) and digital economy MoUs enabling 5G/satellite infrastructure that can host surveillance capabilities.¹⁴ These seemingly innocuous and obscure new steps signal that the Maldives has become a testing ground for integrating the GDI with security objectives, where seemingly benign development projects subtly advance Beijing’s geopolitical footprint in the IOR.

Critically, the “people-centred” initiatives inherently embed HUMINT through dual-use infrastructure: the UTF Agricultural Economic Zone, managed by CHEC, enables Chinese agricultural advisors and technicians to implant surveillance capabilities while cultivating networks among Maldivian farm workers, fishing communities and port personnel. Digital economy MoUs enables 5G/satellite infrastructure hosting surveillance capabilities. GDI’s capacity-building programs in agricultural technology

and fisheries management allow Chinese project managers to embed as case officers within coastal communities, systematically recruiting fishermen who control coastal access points as informants. Unlike BRI's overt "debt trap" branding, GDI's "green development" and "digital cooperation" camouflages HUMINT embedding under "green development specialists," "agricultural consultants," and "marine advisors," penetrating coastal communities while maintaining believable deniability. Through these ostensibly benign GDI infrastructure projects, China establishes embedded HUMINT infrastructure converting development assistance into strategic intelligence networks for monitoring IOR naval traffic, rival power activities and securing Beijing's geopolitical footprint with intentional intelligence-gathering objectives.

GSI and Chinese HUMINT in Maldives

The GSI launched at the Boao Forum on 21 Apr 2022, advances six core commitments i.e. indivisible security, sovereignty respect, UN Charter adherence, legitimate security concerns, dialogue-based dispute resolution and comprehensive traditional/non-traditional security. The GSI prioritises state-centric stability through cyber sovereignty, biosecurity and AI governance, positioning Beijing as the Global South's security mediator. Operationalised via a Feb 2023 concept paper and platforms like the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum, the GSI showcases Chinese surveillance technologies and digital infrastructure to advance win-win partnerships across fragmented geopolitical landscapes.¹⁵¹⁶ Over 90 bilateral and multilateral documents now incorporate GSI language, while systematically converting the GDI economic dependencies into enduring security partnerships that carefully entrench Chinese standards.¹⁷GSI's recent signature achievement remains China's Mar 2023 mediation normalising Saudi-Iran relations, restoring diplomatic ties after seven years and securing both nations obligation to GSI principles.¹⁸¹⁹

In Jan 2024, China and Maldives agreed to explore ways towards implementing the GSI in an effort to deepen cooperation in law enforcement and jointly meet key challenges including those posed by traditional and non-traditional security challenges, to promote the development of bilateral relations and contribute to peace and stability at regional

and global levels.²⁰ In Mar 2024, both countries signed two defence agreements, with Beijing committing to military assistance driven by Malé's needs in national defence, maritime security and disaster response. This collaboration advances China's broader strategy to expand influence in South Asia and offset India's traditional dominance. Under President Muizzu, India withdrew its military personnel from Maldives, while China's presence grew through infrastructure projects and docking permission for its ocean research vessel, Xiang Yang Hong 03. Concerns persist about potential Chinese naval base establishment on Maldivian islands, which could open a maritime front against India and mark Beijing's strategic encirclement.²¹ A Feb 2025 agreement between the Maldives' Environmental Protection Agency and China's South China Sea Institute of Oceanology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, allows Beijing to install ocean-monitoring devices on fish aggregating devices measuring wind, currents, temperature, salinity and underwater acoustic signatures from ships, submarines and aircraft providing dual-use capabilities for chemical, physical and acoustic intelligence collection.²²

China's GSI naturally embeds HUMINT collection within ostensibly benign security cooperation frameworks through multiple channels in the Maldives. Law enforcement capacity-building through joint training programs on traditional and nontraditional threats creates operational liaisons between Maldivian police and Chinese security personnel, enabling Chinese officers to cultivate local informants, recruit assets within Maldivian law enforcement and monitor political shifts and rival Indian/U.S. activities. Maritime intelligence gathering includes the Chinese ocean research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03, which docked at Malé for a month starting Jan 2024, masquerading as a civilian research ship but widely identified as a spy ship; tracking sites continued detecting its signals near Hulhumalé after its Feb 2024 departure. Infrastructure concerns persist about potential Chinese naval base establishment on Maldivian islands and the stationing of Chinese advisors among scientist, ocean researchers, port workers etc to gather coastal intelligence. Judicial and police sector capacity-building provides equipment and training that creates prime HUMINT channels, transforming economic leverage into persistent intelligence networks for IOR dominance.

GCI and Chinese HUMINT in Maldives

Jinping has launched the GCI on 15 Mar 2023, at the CPC Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, championing civilisational diversity while advancing peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom through China's state-centric governance.²³ Rejecting 'clash-of-civilisations' rhetoric, GCI promotes mutual learning over Western universalism.²⁴ GCI exports Confucian-digital authoritarianism via Confucius Institutes (CIs) now rebranded as Chinese International Education Foundation since 2020²⁵ and World Internet Conference platforms, normalising cyber sovereignty and algorithmic control.²⁶ The Ministerial Meeting of Global Civilisations Dialogue in Beijing on 10-11 Jul 2025, secured endorsements from 600+ delegates across 140 countries under 'Safeguarding Diversity of Human Civilisations,' notably penetrating Eastern Europe.²⁷ China's Jun 2024 UNGA resolution establishing Jun 10 as International Day for Dialogue among Civilisations achieved unanimous adoption.²⁸ By Dec 2022, China listed 43 items on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage roster.²⁹

During President Muizzu's Jan 2024 state visit to China, the joint communiqué affirmed Maldives' support for GCI alongside GDI and GSI, committing to active participation and implementation.³⁰ Due to cultural differences between China and Maldives and GCI being recent initiatives, not much Chinese footprints have been noticed or traced in Maldives. However, China appears to have started spadework through diplomatic channels for strengthening its GCI footprints in Maldives. In May 2023, Chinese Ambassador Wang Lixin published an article promoting GCI's emphasis on cultural mutual respect and learning with Maldives, framing it as a driver for bilateral modernisation and Silk Road spirit.³¹ Earlier in Apr 2024, Ambassador Wang highlighted the International Chinese Language Day at Villa College as implementing GCI to deepen cultural exchanges and mutual learning between China and Maldives.³² In 2019, China established its first and only CI at Villa College.³³ Additionally in Sep 2025, the Maldives National University has officially inaugurated the Chinese Language Centre in affiliation with Yunnan Open University.³⁴

China's GCI could augment HUMINT in the Maldives by deepening people-to-people engagement, expanding cultural outreach and creating more opportunities for social interaction, language learning and informal networking. In a small and strategically located country like the Maldives, such soft-power channels can help Chinese actors build trust, identify local influencers and better understand political and social dynamics. CI and Chinese Language Centre could support this process by promoting Mandarin language education, cultural exchange and academic ties, which may increase China's visibility and familiarity within Maldivian society by shaping perceptions, improving access to local communities and creating a more favourable context for intelligence collection.

GGI and Chinese HUMINT in Maldives

The GGI is China's latest global initiative of this decade, forming part of a broader strategy to reshape international order in alignment with its power, norms and interests.³⁵ GGI introduced by Jinping at the SCO Plus meeting in Tianjin on 01 Sep 2025 serves as a cornerstone of China's vision for a 'Community with a Shared Future for Mankind,' completing a quartet with previously launched three global initiatives.³⁶ The GGI systematically addresses the fundamental questions of global governance, 'by whom, how and for whom it is conducted' while responding to the concerns of the international community and presenting itself as the correct choice for tackling global challenges and the essential path to resolving the governance deficit.³⁷ GGI promotes five principles: sovereign equality for universal participation, rule of law for orderly systems, multilateralism for solidarity, a people-centred approach for inclusive outcomes and real results for efficient processes.³⁸ On 08 Mar 2026, Wang Yi stated that more than 150 countries and international organisations have expressed support for the GGI.³⁹

China strategically manipulate multilateral institutions to align them with its preferences, stifling opposition and promoting CCP perspectives.⁴⁰ A former UN staffer, exposed Beijing's tactics for censoring sensitive issues, altering reports and marginalising human rights and democracy in UN forums.⁴¹ As U.S. global influence decline under Trump's

retrenchment policy, China fills the gap by penetrating existing organisations and launching new ones in emerging fields like AI, space and deep-sea mining. The GGI, framed as South-South cooperation, fosters Global South reliance, embeds intelligence networks, normalises Chinese standards and erodes Western norms alongside institutional accountability. In Oct 2021, while marking China's 50th year as a UNSC permanent member, UNSG António Guterres hailed China as an important contributor and a major pillar of international cooperation.⁴² A 24 Oct 2024, House Committee report exposed China's co-optation of the UN and WHO, while advancing standards via Huawei and ZTE support.⁴³ Beijing also wields financial leverage and key personnel placements in organisation such as Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) to block resolutions, elevate sovereignty and development issues over liberal values and forge anti-Western alliances through aid initiatives.⁴⁴

During formal introduction of GGI at SCO meeting in 2023 by Jinping, Maldives President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, while attending the meeting has welcomed the proposal, arguing that the world urgently needs more effective governance concepts and institutions and that China's initiative comes at a timely moment.⁴⁵ Chinese officials and diplomatic statements highlight the 53-year China–Maldives relationship as a microcosm of what the GGI seeks to achieve: equal treatment, mutual assistance and mutual benefit between states of different sizes. Beijing stresses that it supports the Maldives in safeguarding its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and in exploring a development path suited to its own realities, thereby positioning the GGI as a framework for respecting diverse national conditions rather than imposing a single model. China and the Maldives have jointly implemented the consensus reached at COP28 in Dubai, advanced the full and effective implementation of the Paris Agreement and carried out cooperation in the BRI, blue economy, digital economy and green development to narrow the governance deficit with visible achievements.⁴⁶

In Maldives, GGI-aligned engagement can broaden China's access to decision-makers, local intermediaries and issue-based networks while presenting its role as development-

focused, which may reduce suspicion and foster closer ties by building an environment of trust, proximity and sustained contact through cooperation, education and policy dialogue.

Conclusion

Maldives is crystallising 4GIs as China's premier HUMINT hub in the strategic IOR, where the recent initiatives function not as benign public-diplomacy slogans but as a carefully calibrated facade for covert intelligence expansion. Moving beyond the reputational dent inflicted by the BRI's "debt-trap" backlash, Beijing now leverages the 4GIs as a sustainable, multi-track framework to embed intelligence-gathering mechanisms within seemingly developmental and cultural projects. This recalibration allows Beijing to expand its influence in the IOR amid heightened Sino-U.S. rivalry and the spillover effects of the U.S.–Iran war, when regional states are more amenable to alternative security and economic partners. The GDI secures economic leverage by tying Maldivian infrastructure and connectivity to Beijing-financed projects, generating long-term financial dependencies and access to sensitive economic data. The GSI legitimises broader security cooperation, normalising the presence of Chinese-linked security actors and protocols within Maldivian institutions. The GCI institutionalises academic and cultural networks despite cultural differences, offering a soft-power channel for cultivating local intermediaries and informants. Meanwhile, the GGI engages apex governance structures, enabling Beijing to shape policy discourse and access high-level decision-makers. Together, 4GIs create a flawless architecture through which China subtly permeate into Maldivian political, financial and social strata, often bypassing traditional counter-intelligence scrutiny. By blending developmental, security, cultural and governance instruments, Beijing transforms the Maldives into a critical HUMINT and intelligence hub, ensuring that Malé remains firmly anchored within its orbital influence to recalibrate the security geography of the IOR as per China's broader design.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished, and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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