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Business Strategies Amid Trade Wars Malaysian Response to U.S. Tariffs and Geopolitical Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Malaysia's strategic response to the 25% tariff imposed by the United States on Malaysian exports and analyses how a small open economy adapts to escalating trade and geopolitical uncertainty. **Using a conceptual** qualitative approach based on academic literature policy documents and a review of ninety English language newspaper articles the study explores the immediate economic impact government responses diplomatic negotiations and post tariff adaptation strategies. **The findings indicate** that Malaysia responded through inter agency coordination regional cooperation via ASEAN and bilateral engagement with the United States resulting in tariff reductions and opportunities to negotiate exemptions for strategic sectors including electrical and electronics while maintaining national priorities related to palm oil and halal products. **The study demonstrates** that policy flexibility institutional coordination and strategic diplomacy strengthened Malaysia's economic resilience despite persistent external uncertainty. **These findings contribute** to the literature on trade policy adaptation and support Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth and Sustainable Development Goal 17 on partnerships for sustainable development by highlighting the importance of international cooperation and resilient trade governance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The use of punitive tariffs has become an increasingly prominent feature of the global trading system, reshaping the strategic direction of governments and businesses alike [1]. Once regarded primarily as economic policy instruments, trade measures are now widely employed as geopolitical tools that influence international economic relations and reshape global value chains [2]. As a small open economy that is highly integrated into international trade, particularly in the Electrical and Electronics (E&E) industry, Malaysia remains vulnerable to external trade disruptions and policy uncertainty. The United States' decision to impose a 25% tariff on selected Malaysian exports therefore represents not only a shift in trade policy but also a significant challenge to Malaysia's export-led growth strategy, economic resilience, and foreign policy orientation [3, 4]. In this context, strengthening resilient economic growth through effective international cooperation aligns with the

objectives of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals.

Existing studies have extensively examined the economic consequences of trade wars, protectionist policies, and geopolitical uncertainty, particularly their effects on global supply chains, export competitiveness, and regional economic integration. Other studies have also highlighted the strategic importance of diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation in helping countries respond to increasing trade tensions [3]. However, limited attention has been given to how a small open economy strategically combines domestic institutional coordination, regional cooperation, and bilateral diplomacy to respond to rapidly evolving tariff measures while safeguarding its strategic industries and national interests. Consequently, there remains a need for a comprehensive conceptual analysis that explains how these different policy instruments interact in addressing external trade shocks [5, 6].

Accordingly, this study aims to examine Malaysia's strategic response to the 2025 United States tariff measures by analysing the immediate economic impact, government responses, diplomatic negotiations, and post-tariff adaptation strategies [7, 8]. Drawing upon peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and content analysis of ninety English-language newspaper articles, this study seeks to provide a conceptual understanding of how Malaysia adapts to geopolitical uncertainty through coordinated policy responses. By examining the Malaysian experience, this study contributes to the broader literature on strategic trade policy, economic resilience, and the political economy of protectionism, while offering insights into how small open economies can strengthen adaptive governance and international partnerships in an increasingly fragmented global trade environment [9].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Malaysia's response to the United States tariff measures requires a comprehensive theoretical foundation that integrates perspectives from international trade, strategic management, and economic diplomacy. Previous studies have demonstrated that trade disputes are no longer driven solely by economic considerations but are increasingly shaped by geopolitical dynamics, requiring governments to develop adaptive strategies that balance economic resilience with international cooperation [10, 11]. Accordingly, this literature review synthesizes key concepts related to trade wars and protectionism, strategic adaptation in small open economies, and economic diplomacy as the analytical foundation for examining Malaysia's policy responses. These perspectives also provide a relevant framework for understanding how governments can promote resilient economic growth and strengthen international partnerships in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals [12].

2.1. Trade Wars and Protectionism

Trade wars have become an increasingly significant feature of the contemporary global economy, reflecting the growing use of tariffs and other trade restrictions as instruments of economic and geopolitical competition. Rather than serving solely as mechanisms for protecting domestic industries, tariffs are now frequently employed to achieve broader strategic objectives, including influencing international trade relations and reshaping global value chains [13, 14]. The expansion of protectionist policies has created substantial uncertainty for export-oriented economies by disrupting cross-border production networks, increasing transaction costs, and reducing the predictability of international markets. Recent studies suggest that trade conflicts extend beyond bilateral economic disputes and increasingly reflect broader geopolitical rivalries. [15] argues that trade policies have evolved into instruments of geoeconomic statecraft that significantly influence foreign policy and regional economic stability. Likewise, [16] demonstrates that the United States–China trade conflict has reshaped the strategic behaviour of Southeast Asian economies, including Malaysia, which must balance economic interests with geopolitical considerations. These developments indicate that contemporary trade wars require governments not only to respond to immediate economic disruptions but also to formulate adaptive strategies that strengthen long-term national resilience.

2.2. Strategic Adaptation in Small Open Economies

Small open economies are particularly vulnerable to external economic shocks because of their high dependence on international trade, foreign investment, and participation in global value chains. Unlike larger economies that possess greater domestic market capacity, small economies have limited ability to absorb external disruptions and therefore require greater institutional flexibility and policy responsiveness. [17, 18] argue

that economic resilience is determined not only by structural characteristics but also by the ability of governments to implement adaptive policies that reduce vulnerability while maintaining competitiveness. Strategic adaptation has therefore become an essential capability for small open economies facing increasing geopolitical uncertainty. This adaptation involves coordinated government responses, institutional collaboration, market diversification, and continuous policy adjustment to mitigate external risks [19]. Rather than relying solely on defensive measures, governments are expected to combine domestic policy coordination with international engagement to preserve economic stability and sustain long-term growth. Consequently, strategic adaptation provides an appropriate theoretical perspective for understanding how Malaysia responds to evolving tariff measures while maintaining its export competitiveness.

2.3. Economic Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation

Economic diplomacy has become an important instrument through which governments manage international economic relations under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty. Contemporary economic diplomacy extends beyond trade negotiations by incorporating bilateral engagement, regional cooperation, and multilateral partnerships that strengthen national bargaining positions. For ASEAN member states, regional institutions provide additional platforms for policy coordination and collective responses to external economic challenges. Malaysia has traditionally adopted a pragmatic diplomatic approach by balancing its relationships with major economic powers while maintaining regional commitments. According to [20, 21], Malaysia's hedging strategy enables the country to preserve strategic autonomy by avoiding excessive dependence on any single geopolitical actor. This approach is complemented by participation in regional economic frameworks such as ASEAN and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which enhance economic cooperation and improve resilience against external trade disruptions [22]. Within this context, economic diplomacy represents not only a mechanism for resolving trade disputes but also a strategic instrument for supporting sustainable economic growth and strengthening international partnerships, consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Sustainable Development Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative conceptual research design to examine Malaysia's strategic response to the United States tariff measures and the resulting geopolitical uncertainty. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of government policies, diplomatic strategies, and institutional responses rather than to examine causal relationships through statistical analysis [23]. By integrating perspectives from international trade, strategic management, and economic diplomacy, the study provides a conceptual interpretation of how Malaysia adapted its trade strategy in response to external economic shocks. The analysis was based entirely on secondary data collected from multiple authoritative sources. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, official statements, international reports, and ninety English-language newspaper articles reporting developments related to the 2025 United States tariff measures imposed on Malaysian exports [24, 25]. The use of multiple documentary sources enabled data triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and comprehensiveness of the analysis. Documentary materials were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, with particular attention given to publications discussing trade policy, geopolitical developments, economic diplomacy, and Malaysia's strategic responses to tariff measures [26].

The collected documents were analysed using qualitative content analysis supported by thematic analysis. All documentary evidence was systematically reviewed, coded, and categorized to identify recurring patterns concerning Malaysia's policy responses to the tariff measures [27, 28]. Through this analytical process, four major themes emerged, namely the initial tariff implementation and economic shock, strategic response and negotiation, tariff revision and diplomatic outcomes, and post-deal strategic adaptation. These themes subsequently formed the analytical structure of the Results and Discussion section, enabling a comprehensive interpretation of Malaysia's adaptive trade strategy within the broader context of economic resilience, international cooperation, and geopolitical uncertainty.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Initial Tariff Implementation and Economic Shock

The trade tension began with the imposition of a 25% tariff on some Malaysian goods by the US, which sent shockwaves throughout the policy, business, and financial realms. The development has been documented under "US Tariff Developments" and has been seen as a fiscal and political tool [29]. For Malaysian firms, there has been an urgent need for procurement teams to re-estimate landed cost models, for compliance teams to re-visit certificates of origin, and for multinational firms to have crisis meetings on the issue. The development has also been seen as an urgent threat that has brought about a feeling of an impending deadline for renegotiations or exemptions, which has brought about uncertainty and hastened decision-making at the corporate and government levels [30].

As illustrated in Figure 1, the U.S. tariff measures generated interconnected macroeconomic and geopolitical risks for Malaysia. From an economic perspective, the tariffs increased market uncertainty, contributing to potential volatility in Bursa Malaysia and exerting pressure on regional financial markets [31]. The Electrical and Electronics (E&E) sector, a key driver of Malaysia's export economy, was expected to experience substantial disruption, while the semiconductor industry was also projected to face adverse effects due to its dependence on imported inputs and global supply chains [32]. Beyond their economic consequences, the tariffs also carried broader geopolitical implications by raising concerns over Malaysia's strategic balancing between the United States, China, and emerging partnerships with BRICS economies. As depicted in Figure 1, these combined economic and geopolitical pressures illustrate the multidimensional challenges confronting Malaysia in responding to escalating trade tensions.

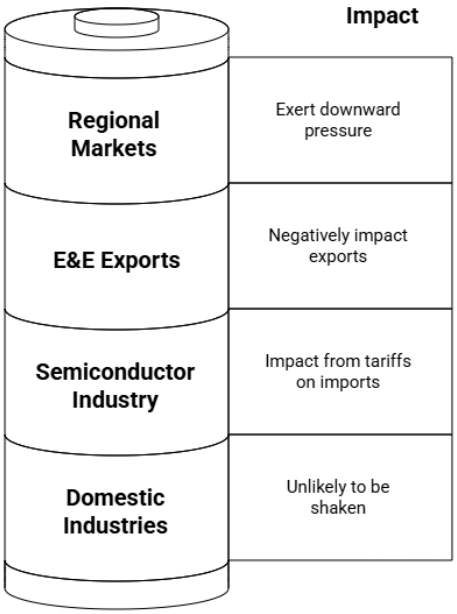


Figure 1. Impact of US Tariffs on Malaysia

These dual facets of risk, therefore, emphasize the interdependency of Malaysia's economic and geopolitical standing. Firstly, the sectoral risks, particularly those in the E&E and semiconductor sectors, demonstrate how overreliance on export markets and policy decisions emanating from them increases economic risk [33, 34]. For instance, Bursa's volatility was not just a reflection of firm-specific uncertainty but was also influenced by investors' perceptions of Malaysia's structural dependence on international value chains. The daily fluctuations in the technology index, therefore, demonstrated the high degree of sensitivity to policy announcements from the US [35, 36]. Secondly, the geopolitical risk highlighted Malaysia's balancing act between its established economic relations with China, burgeoning affiliations with other BRICS nations, and its historical and ongoing relations with the US. Malaysia's geopolitical standing, therefore, required a continuous recalibration to avoid perceptions of siding with either of these economic blocs [37]. The tariffs, therefore, not only served as a trade barrier but also became a litmus test of Malaysia's economic and geopolitical stand-

ing as a neutral trading partner. Strategically, this situation therefore required a multifaceted response from Malaysia's policymakers to not just address the immediate economic implications but also to balance these with the implications of Malaysia's foreign policy standing.

4.2. Strategic Response and Negotiation Phase

Confronted with this kind of economic threat, the Malaysian government adopted a well-coordinated and resolute diplomatic stance, combining domestic reassurance with external engagement. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) did not only express its determination in finding the best solution but also organized interagency task forces with Customs, Finance, and industry regulators to produce swift assessments of the potential impact by HS code or industry [38]. It particularly aimed at addressing the potential impact on exports via scenario modeling, consultations with stakeholders in the E&E and palm oil sectors, and the preparation of technical dossiers for U.S. counterparts [39, 40]. At the regional level, Malaysia has involved ASEAN member states in assessing the viability of regional initiatives, utilizing instruments such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to enhance regional stability and bargaining power. This suggests that the Malaysian position has been twofold: one is the maintenance of its current trade flows, and the other is the strengthening of its position [41].



Figure 2. Malaysia-US Tariff Negotiations

As depicted in Figure 2, during the negotiation phase, Malaysia took a number of significant steps. These included tabling its four-point proposal on the issue of tariffs to the US, expressing its commitment to protecting its commodities, specifically mentioning palm oil, during the negotiations [42]. Another significant engagement during this phase was the high-level talks, where Malaysian and US officials discussed tariffs via video conference. During the talks, experts highlighted the need for Malaysia and the US to conclude the tariff agreement before the visit of President Trump [43]. The negotiation phase was also used for diplomatic visits, where Miti Minister Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz and Second Finance Minister Datuk Seri Amir Hamzah Azizan planned a visit to the US to resolve the issues regarding tariffs. The Prime Minister also reassured the public that Malaysia still had time to negotiate the US tariff.

These steps are indicative of the Malaysian attempt to coordinate tactical diplomacy with structural safeguarding, thereby assuring that tactical actions are linked with strategic positioning. This four-point plan signifies a tangible commitment to purpose and engagement, with a focus on palm oil to reinforce the protection of politically and economically vital commodities. The high-level video conferences showcase the country's ability to respond quickly and engage continuously in spite of geographical inaccessibility. This serves to assure investors of the country's continued engagement. The emphasis on the urgency of the issue signifies the need for timely engagement in tariff diplomacy, where the absence of such engagement may result in substantial long-term implications for the terms of engagement and the development of path dependence [44].

The proposed visits underscore the need for continued engagement in international economic diplomacy and position Malaysia as a state willing to engage economically on its own terms. In conclusion, the above actions showcase Malaysia's attempt to develop an effective response to the issue at hand by prioritizing the need for rapid responsiveness and sectoral prioritization to enhance bargaining power.

4.3. Tariff Revision and Diplomatic Outcomes

The negotiation efforts ultimately led to favorable revisions and potential exemptions as presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Favorable Trade Terms

As a result of the positive response from the United States regarding the position of Malaysia, the rate of tariffs has been reduced from 25% to 19%. In addition, there are findings that suggest that the rate of tariffs could be reduced further to 15%. There are signs that the United States is willing to offer exemptions for some export commodities such as palm oil, automobile parts, and aerospace components [45, 46]. However, the Prime Minister of Malaysia has stated that not all the U.S. demands are being met, with the country's interests being a top priority. The Prime Minister has also indicated that the suspension of tariffs by the United States is not intended for the long term.

These diplomatic results collectively demonstrate the balance Malaysia attempted to strike between conciliatory and resistive actions. The adjustment of rates from 25% to 19%, and even the possibility of a 15% agreement, demonstrate the results of sustained negotiations and coalition-building, but they also emphasize the fluidity of U.S [47]. trade policy and the episodic nature of U.S.-Sino tariff negotiations. The involvement of the United States in considering possible exemptions for palm oil, automotive parts, and aerospace components serves to corroborate the lobbying efforts of Malaysia while also underscoring the fact that any exemptions would depend on U.S. interests and interest group advocacy. The non-negotiable nature of the halal standard serves to underscore the salience of normative red lines in economic statecraft, suggesting that economic negotiations are part of a broader framework of cultural, ethical, and institutional factors [48, 49]. This approach also underscores Malaysia's commitment to its own and regional interests and its tendency to communicate to the U.S. that certain national values are non-negotiable. The Malaysian Prime Minister's characterization of this new agreement as a 'temporary reprieve' underscores awareness of the fluid and episodic nature of U.S. actions and the need to remain vigilant and to develop mechanisms to institutionalize this process to adjust to new realities [50]. Conceptually, this phase of the crisis underscores the importance to small open economies to translate negotiation gains into a larger and more integrated strategy of building resilience, developing capabilities, and hedging risks [51].

4.4. Post-Deal Strategy and Future Implications

In the wake of the tariff revision, Malaysia planned to roll out three key follow-up actions (Figure 4), signaling a transition from reactive diplomacy to proactive strategic positioning.

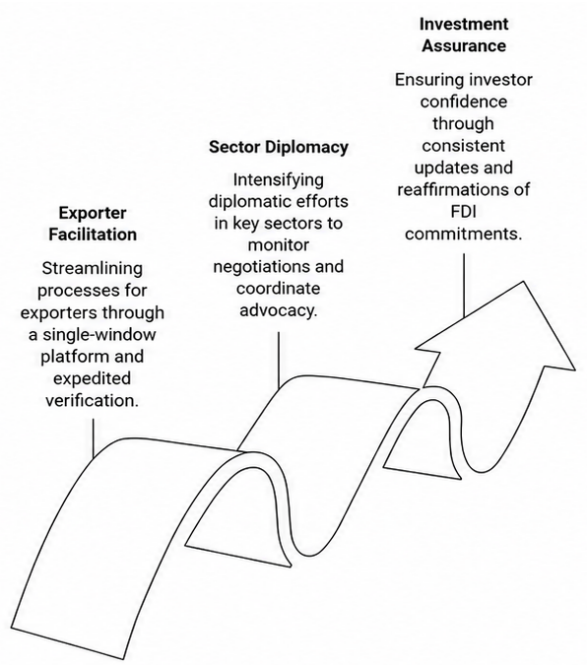


Figure 4. Follow-Up Actions

Firstly, the government introduced a range of specific measures aimed at helping exporters. These measures include the development of a single window guidance platform, speeding up procedures for checking the rules of origin, providing guidance to enterprises looking to diversify their shipping routes and ensure compliance with documentation requirements, and increasing access to export finance schemes for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Secondly, the commitment of Malaysia in advancing sectoral diplomacy has been demonstrated through the establishment of task forces that are mandated to take charge of the development of the palm oil industry, automotive parts, aerospace parts, and electrical and electronics sectors, including the monitoring of exemption negotiations, the preparation of technical dossiers of the respective sectors, and the holding of direct talks with foreign trade missions.

The government emphasized its commitment to investment assurance and communication. It promised to deliver transparency to the international community by keeping them abreast of market developments, thereby reiterating its commitment to foreign direct investment as a tool for stabilizing the Bursa market and dealing with international credit rating agencies. There is a significant need for a long-term and dynamic framework that seeks to harmonize economic objectives with diplomatic initiatives. The framework includes free trade agreements, market access, digital trade facilitation, and economic sectors to be addressed in future tariff negotiations. This development marks a shift from expediency to a resilience-based approach.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for policymakers, trade authorities, and export-oriented industries operating in increasingly uncertain geopolitical environments. First, governments should strengthen institutional coordination by establishing integrated inter-agency mechanisms capable of responding rapidly to external trade disruptions. Close collaboration among trade ministries, customs authorities, financial institutions, and industry representatives can facilitate timely policy formulation, improve negotiation capacity, and minimize the adverse impacts of sudden tariff measures on strategic industries.

Second, the study underscores the importance of strengthening economic diplomacy through both regional and bilateral cooperation. Active engagement within ASEAN and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), together with continuous bilateral negotiations, can enhance national bargaining power while preserving strategic economic interests. Such collaborative approaches are particularly important for small open economies seeking to maintain stable trade relationships amid evolving geopolitical tensions and

are consistent with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, which emphasizes partnerships for sustainable development.

Third, export-oriented firms should adopt proactive risk management strategies by diversifying export markets, strengthening supply chain resilience, and improving compliance with international trade regulations. Greater investment in market intelligence, scenario planning, and strategic capability development can reduce dependence on individual trading partners and enhance organizational preparedness for future policy uncertainty. These measures support long-term business competitiveness and contribute to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 by promoting resilient and sustainable economic growth. Finally, the findings suggest that long-term trade resilience should extend beyond responding to individual tariff measures. Governments and industries should institutionalize adaptive trade governance by integrating strategic planning, continuous stakeholder engagement, and policy evaluation into national trade strategies. Such an approach would enable small open economies to respond more effectively to future geopolitical shocks while maintaining economic stability and international competitiveness.

6. CONCLUSION

It is evident from this analysis that Malaysia's response to the 25% tariff imposed by the United States includes tactical and strategic actions. The unforeseen shock of tariffs has highlighted the weakness of Malaysia's export-led growth strategy, especially with respect to electronics/electrical Products and palm oil, and at the same time has encouraged policy learning, collective action, and engagement at bilateral and regional levels. These findings suggest that for a small and open economy like Malaysia, parameters of engagement are to be strategically crafted.

From a conceptual perspective, this case study demonstrates the link between trade strategies and dynamic capabilities. The use of inter-agency task forces, scenario modeling, and the creation of comprehensive technical dossiers suggests a desire to demonstrate institutional preparedness and flexibility. The emphasis placed upon ensuring the security of commodities like palm oil and creating criteria for halal requirements suggests that a country's trade strategy cannot be viewed as separate from cultural and ethical imperatives, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of trade negotiations. The outcome of the negotiations, particularly with regards to the reduction of tariffs to 19%, can be viewed as a short-term remedy rather than a long-term solution. This is particularly true considering the characterization of the negotiations by the Malaysian government, which views the negotiations as a temporary respite. This characterization is particularly true with regards to the cyclical nature of trade tensions. Thus, it can further be argued that there is a need for a long-term orientation of trade policies, which in turn requires policy flexibility.

The implications of this finding for policymakers are twofold. First, in order to encourage long-term economic resilience, policymakers must seek to diversify export markets and use free trade agreements to reduce dependency on dyadic relationships. Second, in order to encourage long-term economic stability, policymakers must continue to be open to key stakeholders by keeping the lines of communication open to mitigate the effects of increased uncertainty. Evidence of the implementation of this can be seen in the facilitation of exporters, sectoral task forces, and investment protection agreements. As part of the lessons learned in Malaysia's experience in the U.S. tariff issue, an important lesson for other small and open economies is the need to balance tactical advantages with strategic strengths, and economic statecraft with cultural integrity. Conceptually, this analysis contributes to the discourse on the challenges faced by small economies in global value chains in reconciling asymmetric relationships between economic and geopolitical imperatives. In terms of directions for future research, a comparison of other ASEAN countries would enrich understanding of strategic trade policy in a world where globalization is becoming increasingly fragmented.

7. DECLARATIONS

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7.2. Author Contributions

Conceptualization: MF; Methodology: ZH; Software: YM; Validation: KM and SH; Formal Analysis: KM and MF; Investigation: YM; Resources: SH; Data Curation: MF; Writing Original Draft Preparation: MF and ZH; Writing Review and Editing: SH and KM; Visualization: YM; All authors, KM, MF, YM, SH, and ZH, have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

7.3. Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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7.5. Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest, known competing financial interests, or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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