India Steps Up Policy Support to Bolster Domestic Demand Amidst Headwinds from U.S. Trade Policies



- The global economy could undergo significant changes as the U.S., under President Trump's "reciprocal tariffs" framework, seeks to renegotiate trade deals with major economies.
- This framework could potentially raise U.S. import tariffs significantly
 by factoring in tariffs, VAT, and non-tariff policies, and could disrupt
 decades of trade policy and challenge the post-WWII global order
 that has favoured free trade.
- India, with a high tariff differential with the U.S., may face headwinds from potential U.S. tariffs, but its relatively lower export dependence limits the economic impact.
- Further, India and the U.S. are actively negotiating a bilateral trade agreement, expected to be finalized by Sep - Dec '25. This could potentially shorten the duration of any reciprocal tariffs, should they be implemented.
- With trade policy uncertainty, India is focusing on boosting domestic demand through fiscal and monetary policy measures to support growth.
- The FY26 Union Budget shifts focus from government CAPEX to boosting private consumption while maintaining fiscal consolidation.
- Aligning with fiscal efforts to boost demand, the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) reduced the policy rate by 25-bps in February to 6.25%—its first cut in nearly five years.
- India's economic growth showed signs of moderate recovery in Q3, driven by continued robust agricultural growth, improved industrial activity, and resilient services.
- Recognising the moderate recovery and lower-than-expected GDP print in Q2, we revise our real GDP growth forecast for FY25 from 6.7% to 6.1%. For FY26, we project economic growth to show a moderate pick to 6.4%, factoring in policy support.
- Headline CPI inflation dropped to 4.3% in January, driven by a sharp decline in food inflation. It is expected to stay around 4% in February and March.
- This sets the stage for a potential 25-bps policy rate cut in April, though uncertainties from U.S. trade and tariffs persist.

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Donald Trump's plan to change the global trade system

The global economy may be on the verge of a wholesale rewriting of the international economic order with potentially sweeping long-term implications. The current international economic order – to the extent one can characterize it as such – has been heavily shaped by the United States (and, to a lesser extent, close US allies) in the past 60 or so years.

Its organizing principles have been: (1) that free or near free trade that boosts economic growth and geopolitical stability; and (2) that government-directed economic initiatives – whether targeted protectionism, state-directed capital allocation, or so-called industrial policy – are obstacles to maximizing prosperity and should be phased out or severely limited. In many respects, these guiding principles have produced myriad success stories: Kinetic conflicts between the world's major powers (and their proxies) have collapsed in frequency; global poverty has shrunk dramatically; previously severely underdeveloped countries have experienced/are experiencing rapid economic development and rising living standards; technological breakthroughs are happening at the fastest pace since the Industrial Revolution.

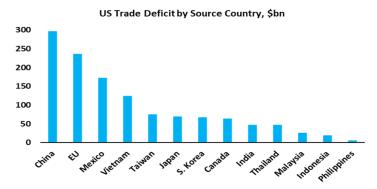
Yet, even in countries that have been unambiguous beneficiaries of this global order, dissatisfaction among the general public has been building, with trade being a key component of voter discontent. Brexit and US President Trump's first electoral victory in 2016 were the first overt signs of such dissatisfaction. Presently, Italy has a populist leader, populist-oriented political groups are ascendant in countries such as Germany and France, there are reports of bubbling discontent in China, and – most notably – Donald Trump and his version of populism and heterodox economic thinking have returned to the Oval Office.

Tariffs are President Trump's most visible economic policy tool, but, as discussed in prior months, his macro policy agenda is composed of a plethora of initiatives. On the tariff front, the prospect of Trump 2.0 tariffs to date has been used as a bargaining chip rather than as part of an integrated economic policy plan. Tariff threats against Canada and Mexico, for instance, have been used to facilitate cooperation on key Trump 2.0 non-economic policy goals, most notably illegal immigration. It has been our best assessment that the Trump 2.0 tariff agenda would not be put into practice until after 2025Q1, given the lessons learned from Trump 1.0 and the strong desire for changes in trade policy to be fairly comprehensive and durable.

On that score, President Trump laid out in mid-February a broad framework for prospective tariffs. On its surface, this framework – which Mr. Trump labelled "reciprocal tariffs" – encompasses far more than the imposition of new (or, in some cases, higher) duties on goods and/or services

imported into the US. As articulated, this framework would incorporate not just US trading partners' import duties into the president's tariff calculus, but it also would include matters as varied as bilateral US trade balances, trading partners' domestic regulatory and tax regimes (with the Trump Administration particularly focused on value-added taxes) and other non-tariff policies. The Trump 2.0 economic team will be preparing country-by-country analysis based on these factors by April 1 for the president's review. The accompanying chart highlights countries with sizeable trade balances vis-à-vis the US – these countries are most likely to be part of the initial wave of US trade actions.

US trade deficits with China, EU, Mexico and Vietnam remain large



Source: US BEA; Note: Data is for CY 2024.

Such a framework and the possible ensuing US trade policy measures would, if enacted, be a radical break from how trade policy has been conducted for not just the past 60 or so years of US dominance but since roughly 1900. If enacted, this framework would have the capacity to significantly increase the effective tariff rate on US imports, especially if the US were to move forward with adding US import duties on top of a trading partner's value-add tax rate (VAT) to arrive at the import duty a specific country would face on its exports to the US. In such a scenario, the average effective import tariff rate for the US would rise from about 3 % currently to something on the order of 20 %.

While details are lacking at this early stage and the US creating an import duty rate by adding its low (2 to 3 %) most favoured nation (MFN) tariff rate to a trading partner's VAT rate would be a lose-lose for all sides, there is a long history of the US taking issue with trading partners who provide export rebates that typically key off of their respective domestic VAT rate. In decades past, the US attempted various export rebates for its companies, which led to a 30-year battle over the practice with the EU. In the 1990s, the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruled that such US rebates violated established trade agreements, but the EU ones were upheld. Trump 2.0 seems to be seeking to relitigate this dynamic.



India and Thailand have one of the highest tariff differential with the US, though India's lower export dependence provides a cushion

Tariff Rates Differential with US, AHS weighted %								
	India	Thailand	Mexico	China	Philippines	Malaysia	Canada	Indonesia
All Products	6.5	5.3	5.2	4.3	1.9	1.1	1.0	0.0
Capital goods	6.6	3.8	2.3	1.6	0.4	0.5	0.0	4.9
Consumer goods	9.7	8.7	6.4	3.7	6.8	6.8	2.2	1.0
Intermediate goods	9.8	6.5	5.2	1.8	1.4	0.3	0.1	2.0
Raw materials	6.0	0.4	14.3	17.2	11.4	0.9	2.3	1.9
Animal	30.2	44.2	28.9	9.3	8.9	-0.2	29.7	4.9
Chemicals	9.4	5.3	2.6	3.9	1.9	-0.5	0.0	3.4
Food Products	35.6	15.1	17.4	1.5	0.3	0.0	7.6	4.5
Footwear	17.2	12.6	12.0	-5.8	1.8	-7.7	0.0	-7.7
Fuels	6.8	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0	2.0	0.0	4.4
Hides and Skins	3.0	-2.0	4.7	-4.7	8.0	-10.9	0.3	-1.0
Mach and Elec	6.0	2.5	2.0	1.1	0.2	0.7	0.0	4.6
Metals	7.8	5.5	5.0	1.7	5.4	0.7	0.0	4.4
Minerals	8.6	0.1	0.0	0.7	2.9	0.4	0.0	4.6
Miscellaneous	7.8	9.1	4.4	0.8	1.1	-0.2	0.0	5.0
Plastic or Rubber	6.8	4.7	5.9	3.0	8.0	5.6	0.0	6.3
Stone and Glass	9.4	2.0	3.8	3.6	5.0	4.8	0.0	3.7
Textiles and Clothing	15.6	-6.7	9.7	24.3	0.9	-6.7	0.0	-11.0
Transportation	14.4	11.9	6.9	9.8	7.3	-1.2	0.0	9.2
Vegetable	20.5	33.8	10.5	13.2	2.7	0.1	0.2	0.7
Wood	8.1	0.9	2.0	0.6	2.4	-0.5	0.0	0.2
US Imports % of Source								
Country GDP	2.2	12.0	27.4	2.4	3.0	11.9	18.6	2.0

Source: WITS; Note: Data is of CY 2022.

As with most things related to Trump, it is important to try to sort the signal from the noise. Put differently, what is for negotiation and what is a core policy tenet? President Trump truly does see international trade as an area where the US is "taken advantage of" in his words because much of the world gets access to the world's largest consumption base for free, i.e. with little or no import duties. He also sees trade as having been a catalyst for the diminished economic prospects in certain regions of the US, and these same regions have propelled him to the Presidency twice. The reciprocal tariff framework he has outlined is more sweeping than nearly anyone anticipated. Together, these factors point to a potentially significantly more disruptive trade policy agenda than previously anticipated.

Still, based on how President Trump operates, it seems likely that at least part of this framework is designed to push trading partners into immediate and serious discussions about trade and other economic matters, including the regulation of US companies. Indeed, India almost immediately announced that it would be seeking to purchase more energy from the US, and Japan announced that its trade representatives would be starting discussions with their US counterparts as soon as possible. Close US allies and/or countries where President Trump enjoys a favourable relationship with the head of state (such as India) likely will negotiate new bilateral trade agreements that prevent worst case scenarios.

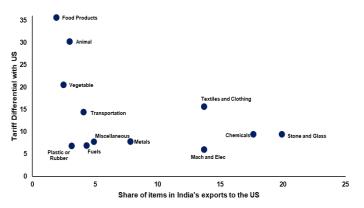
Regardless, the seriousness of the Trump Administration to rewrite the existing global trading framework should not be underestimated. The sheer depth and breadth of the so-called reciprocal tariff framework underscore that Trump 2.0 is seeking major structural changes — ones that go substantially beyond anything considered in Trump 1.0. And while the US always was a beneficiary of the global trading order, the world as a whole also gained given the benefits of low-cost trade with the world's largest economy. For the next

four years, US influence on global economic policy is going to have a keen focus on what's best for the US with limited focus on what that may mean for the rest of the world.

India-U.S. trade relations and potential tariff impact

US trade policies will have implications for global trade and for India. The US is India's second-largest trading partner, accounting for 18.9% of India's exports and 6.4% of its imports in H1-FY25. Key exports from India to the U.S. include pharmaceuticals, telecom instruments, machinery, gems, and textiles, while India imports petroleum and coal from the U.S. Despite this strong trade relationship, India's goods exports to the U.S. represent only 2.2% of India's GDP, reflecting the country's relatively lower reliance on international trade with the US. Moreover, India's trade imbalance with the U.S. is relatively modest. In 2024, the U.S. goods trade deficit with India stood at approximately \$46 billion, almost 15% of the U.S. trade deficit with China. This lower share reduces the likelihood of India facing broadbased tariffs akin to those imposed on China, Canada, or Mexico.

Select Indian industries relatively more vulnerable to reciprocal tariffs given high tariff rates differential



Source: WITS; Note: Data is of CY 2022.

Moreover, India and the U.S. are now in active discussions to finalize a bilateral trade agreement, which is expected to be completed by Sep - Dec '25. India has also demonstrated a willingness to reduce tariffs, as reflected in recent cuts to import duties in the budget and is also proposing to increase imports of crude oil, LNG, and defence products from the U.S. to help address the trade imbalance. However, despite these efforts, the risk of targeted tariffs remains, particularly in light of President Trump's tariff strategy, which has shifted from universal tariffs to reciprocal tariffs. According to the latest tariff differential data from WITS (2022), India has one of the highest tariff differentials with the U.S. of ~6.5 percentage points, but a significant portion of imports from the U.S. face tariffs in the 0-10% range. If reciprocal tariffs are imposed based on the average differential, an incremental ~7% tariff/duty could be levied on India's goods and services exports. If GST (assumed at an average of



18%, given 3/4th collection is at 18% slab rate) is also factored in, the potential incremental tariff could rise by ~25% on India's exports to the USA. This could result in a negative impact of 20 - 70bps of India's nominal GDP, with industries like stones & glass, textiles, chemicals, and machinery & electronic, food products, and IT & software exports likely to be the hardest hit given higher tariff differential and/or share in exports to the US. Given potential risks from external trade front, Indian policymakers stepped up support for domestic demand, which we discuss in subsequent sections.

India's economic growth recovery is on track in H2-FY25

After a disappointing H1-FY25, India's economy is showing signs of a moderate recovery in H2-FY25. This recovery in Q3-FY25 is driven by continued robust agricultural growth, improved industrial activity, and resilient services. On the demand side, private consumption attempted to stage a recovery, driven by rural demand and also buoyed by festive spending. Additionally, government expenditure, especially central government CAPEX, surged in Q3. However, private investment and exports remain sluggish.

While the economic slowdown appears to have bottomed out, the recovery has been moderate and uneven, relying on select sectors. As a result, we have revised our FY25 real GDP growth forecast down to 6.1% YoY from the previous estimate of 6.7%, with Q3-FY25 projected at 6.2%. This downward revision reflects lower-than-expected Q2 GDP growth, weak urban demand, lacklustre export performance, lack of broader private investment revival, and a reduction in the FY25 central government budget expenditure (from the budgeted estimate). These are partly offset by strong rural demand and sequential recovery in corporate earnings and industrial output, as well as resilience in the service sector.

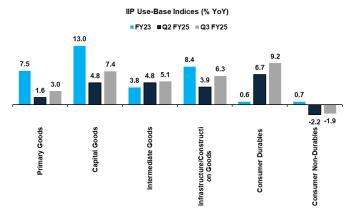
In line with our expectations, policy response to support economic recovery has started to materialise. Both fiscal and monetary policymakers are stepping in to support aggregate demand, ensuring that recovery continues into FY26. Accordingly, we project economic growth to show a moderate pick to 6.4%, factoring policy support. The uncertain global economic landscape — particularly potential US trade actions — adds headwinds to the outlook.

Economic activity registered moderate recovery in Q3

Economic activity showed a moderate recovery in Q3, with the industrial sector bouncing back after sluggish demand conditions, election-related disruptions, and weather challenges impacted H1-FY25. The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) growth for Q3-FY25 stood at 3.9%,

outperforming the 2.7% recorded in the previous quarter. Manufacturing growth accelerated from 3.3% YoY in Q2 to 4.3% in Q3, driven by strong performances in electrical equipment, machinery, base metals, and fabricated metals. Corporate results further confirm the recovery, with net sales growth in the manufacturing sector rising from 2.1% YoY in Q2 to a 4.5%¹ in Q3 FY25, suggesting a fairly good pick-up in Gross Value Added (GVA) for the sector during the quarter.

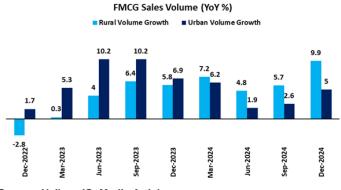
A board-based recovery in industrial activity in Q3



Source: CMIE

Private consumption also showed recovery in Q3-FY25, driven largely by festive demand, with rural consumption leading the charge. Most of the rural indicators suggest improvement, barring non-durables primarily due to food & pharma. Rural FMCG growth outpaced urban growth, with Q3-FY25 sales volume rising by 9.9%, the highest growth in a year. Other high-frequency indicators, such as tractor and fertilizer sales, also point to strengthening rural demand. This trend is expected to continue, driven by agricultural growth and easing inflationary pressures. We expect rural demand to continue to lead private consumption recovery, supported by favourable farm sector outlook.

Rural consumption demand posts a strong rebound, while urban demand continues to lag



Source: Neilsen IQ, Media Articles

¹ Based on sample of 3.3K companies sourced from CMIE.



While rural demand shows a strong revival, urban demand remains sluggish. Despite some improvement due to the festive season reflected in strong consumer durables, urban demand indicators—such as lacklustre FMCG sales growth, declining passenger car sales, and slowing GST collections—suggest ongoing weakness. This can be attributed to the slowdown in urban real salary/wage growth, as reflected in corporate employee costs. However, the recent policy measures, particularly the reduction in income tax rates in the budget, could offer some support to urban consumption in FY26.

Capital & Infrastructure related segment grew owing to government capital expenditure

The capital goods and infrastructure/construction goods segment also showed a pick-up in Q3-FY25, driven by a surge in government capital expenditure, as private investment continues to remain sluggish. Central government expenditure rose by 47.7% YoY, up from 10.3% in Q2. State government capital expenditure also rose to ~7%2 in Q3 from a contraction of -4% in Q2. This, alongside sustained demand in the real estate sector, has supported production in industries like cement and steel. Central government capital expenditure in Q4 is expected to continue supporting economic growth, with an implied growth rate of 21% for FY25 (based on revised estimates). However, the government has revised its FY25 total expenditure estimate down, reducing the YoY growth forecast from 8.5% in the Budget Estimate (BE) to 6.1% in the revised estimate. This includes a significant cut in the CAPEX growth target from 17.1% YoY to 7.3% YoY. As a result, fiscal support will be weaker than previously anticipated in Q4-FY25.

Meanwhile, private investment has remained subdued. New investment projects announced in the December 2024 quarter contracted by ~2% YoY, a sharp reversal from the 86.5% YoY growth in the previous quarter. Manufacturing led the investment, with ~87% concentrated in chemicals and metals. This suggests that a broad-based recovery in private investment remains out of reach. Softer domestic conditions and heightened global trade uncertainty are likely to delay any broader revival in private investment.

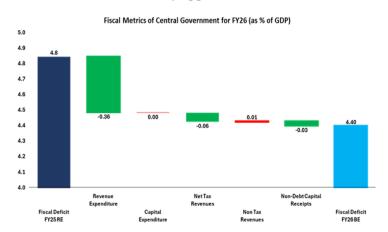
External demand remains weak and marred by high uncertainty. India's trade deficit widened in Q3-FY25 both sequentially as well as on an annualised basis. The growth in exports was also muted at 3.3% YoY, continuing to reflect moderate external demand. While the merchandise trade deficit has worsened, the services surplus has risen by 13%, which will offset some of the worsening merchandise

trade deficit. US trade/tariff policies continue to pose significant risks to the external demand outlook.

Government shifts focus to boost consumption while committing to fiscal consolidation

As anticipated, the FY26 Union Budget signals a shift from a focus on government CAPEX to measures aimed at boosting private consumption. Key steps include rationalizing income tax slabs and raising TDS/TCS thresholds, which will increase households' disposable income. A slower pace of expenditure growth, reliance on optimistic tax assumptions, and a large RBI dividend have created fiscal space for these tax reliefs. Despite these measures, the government remains committed to fiscal consolidation, targeting a fiscal deficit of 4.4% of GDP for FY26 compared to 4.8% (revised estimate) in FY25. This is driven by expenditure rationalization, with total expenditure projected at 14.2% of GDP in FY26, down from 14.6% in FY25 (RE). Capital expenditure (CAPEX) is retained at 3.1% of GDP, with a modest 10.1% growth forecast for FY26, especially given the low base in FY25 RE.

Fiscal deficit for FY26 is pegged at 4.4%



Source: Union Budget Documents

This policy shift is necessary as the previous years' emphasis on CAPEX has failed to significantly crowd in private investment. While corporations have deleveraged their balance sheets, aided by corporate tax cuts, they remain cautious about committing to capacity creation due to weak domestic demand and global trade uncertainties. Factors such as moderate real wage growth, higher tax burdens, and reduced credit growth have dampened domestic consumption. Given the ongoing global trade risks, boosting domestic demand is critical.

The income tax measures aim to increase disposable income and, in turn, stimulate private consumption. The government hopes these steps will create a virtuous cycle, driving investment, job creation, and consumption.

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² Based on data of 17 states.

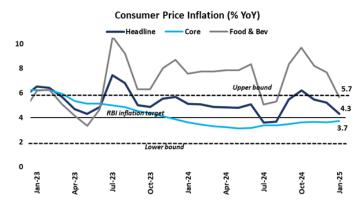


However, with only 2% of the population paying income tax, the effectiveness of these measures in significantly boosting consumption is uncertain. Still, we expect urban demand to show some improvement in FY26. Factoring in a positive boost from the tax cuts, offset by slower revenue expenditure growth, we estimate these measures could lift economic growth by around 20-25 bps in FY26. The budget also prioritizes labour-intensive MSMEs, exports, and rural sectors, which should help generate employment and further stimulate consumption. For more details, please refer to the Budget Review report.

RBI cuts policy rate by 25-bps in February; another rate cut expected in April

Aligning with fiscal efforts to boost demand, the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) reduced the policy rate by 25-bps in February to 6.25%—its first cut in nearly five years. The MPC's minutes indicated that MPC members acknowledge the growth slowdown, which needed a policy response. The RBI governor noted that inflation has fallen and is expected to moderate further, while economic growth is set to recover but will remain well below last year's levels. These dynamics have created room for the MPC to support growth while keeping inflation in check. The MPC also decided to maintain a neutral stance, providing the RBI flexibility to adjust should economic or inflation conditions worsen, especially amid ongoing global trade tensions.

Headline inflation eased to a five-month low of 4.3%



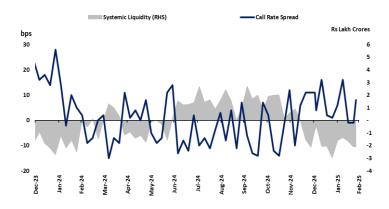
Source: CMIE

Headline CPI inflation dropped sharply to a five-month low of 4.3% in January, down from 5.2% in December. This was driven by a significant drop in food inflation, particularly vegetables, which fell to 11.3% in January from 26.6% in December. While rising edible oil prices partially offset this, inflation in eggs, pulses, and cereals also moderated. Core inflation remained subdued, edging up only 10-bps to 3.71% and staying below the 4% level for the 14th consecutive month, signalling continued weak demand conditions.

Daily food price data suggests that inflation will remain contained in the near term. We expect inflation to stay around 4% in February and March, averaging approximately 4.2% for Q4-FY25, which is below the RBI's projection of 4.4%. This sets the stage for a potential 25-bps rate cut in April, although uncertainties stemming from US trade and tariff policies continue to cloud the outlook.

Alongside the rate cut, the RBI has focused on improving the transmission of policy rates. To address the ongoing systemic liquidity deficit, it has announced several liquidity infusing measures, including a \$10bn USD/INR Buy/Sell Swap and 45-day VRR of Rs75K crore in February. Since December 2024, the RBI has announced liquidity infusing measures totalling ~Rs 6 trillion (including CRR cut). It also continues to conduct daily overnight VRR operations. Despite these efforts, the liquidity deficit remains significant, hovering around Rs 1.8-2.2 lakh crores, putting pressure on the weighted average call rate, which has traded above the policy repo rate on many days. We expect liquidity challenges to persist in the coming weeks due to FX interventions, tax outflows, and year-end demand. Therefore, the RBI is likely to introduce additional measures to inject durable liquidity, such as more OMOs, longertenure VRRs, and USD/INR Buy/Sell Swap auctions.

Overnight call rate has been hovering over the policy repo rate on most days



Source: CMIE; Note: Call rate spread is the difference between WACR and the policy repo rate. Data till 24th February

Currency Market: After adopting a more flexible approach in December - January, the RBI stepped up intervention in the FX markets in February, helping the rupee recover from near 88 against the USD. In February so far, depreciation pressures have continued, with the rupee falling an additional ~1.0%, now trading close to ~87. As a result, the rupee's overvaluation in REER terms has decreased from 7% in December to about 4.8% in January. We expect the rupee to continue trading with a depreciation bias in the near term, driven by a widening trade deficit, persistent foreign capital outflows, and global uncertainty.



Equity Market: Indian equity markets have continued their correction in February, fuelled by a sustained selling spree by foreign investors, with Rs 223 billion in FII outflows so far this month. Despite positive factors such as income tax cuts and RBI rate adjustments, market sentiment remains under pressure. This is largely due to mixed corporate earnings, negative global cues from tariffs announced by the Trump administration, and FII funds rotation to the US and, more recently, China. As a result, the NIFTY50 has fallen an additional 4% (data until 24th Feb) after declining by 2% in January.

Bond Market: After rising in the first half of January due to the hardening of US yields, India's G-Sec bond yields have since eased across various tenures. This decline was driven by a moderation in crude oil prices, the RBI's rate cut, durable liquidity infusion through OMOs, and FII inflows into the debt market. Additionally, stable market borrowings announced in the budget and continued fiscal consolidation have supported bond yields. Consequently, the 10-year benchmark yield has decreased from 6.81% on January 15th to 6.70% by February 24th.



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