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Uncertainty in the Shadow of a Rising China

By Alexander Bellah

During South Korea's historic transition to democracy at the Cold War's end, the opportunity to normalize relations with a rising China promised immense economic gains with few compromises to national security interests. Faith in this promise appeared founded as, in most cases, bilateral relations with China improved along economic, cultural, and even security arcs from 1992 through the mid-2000s. By 2008, as the Lee Myung-bak administration came into office, some of these trends had begun to shift, leading some in Seoul to question whether Chinese and Korean interests were fully compatible. In 2010, China's role in supporting Pyongyang following North Korea's sinking of the *Cheonan* and its ambivalence toward the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island brought these critical voices to the fore, suggesting that Korea's honeymoon with China was at an end.

Since normalization in 1992, Korea has faced a dilemma in which its long-term economic—and at times security and cultural—interests demand that it participate in China's rise, but more immediate security concerns and historical path dependency anchor it to the ROK-U.S. alliance. China's rapid growth, now in its fourth decade, has quickly raised its economic appeal to Korea while threatening to disrupt a regional security order that depends on U.S. involvement. With many regional actors—including voices within Korea—expressing concern that China's rapid economic and military rise could precipitate extended competition with the U.S., this basic dilemma has grown in complexity. How Korea would respond if forced to make a choice is a topic of fierce debate within Korea and of overwhelming importance to the United States as it seeks to grapple with the ramifications of China's growth. To the extent that immediate security interests vis-à-vis North Korea and institutional dependency on the U.S. alliance are likely to prevent Korea from "bandwagoning" with China, its ever-deepening Chinese economic relations would also seem to push it toward a neutral stance.

The single most important factor determining Korea's stance moving forward will be the extent to which its security concerns about China's rise are discernable from its security concerns about North Korea. Since this dilemma involves elements of time-inconsistency, disentangling it requires flexibility to engage hypothetical timeframes and scenarios. If Korea worries over China's military and economic rise only because it may complicate goals of stability and eventual unification on the Peninsula, then there will likely be a very cautious Korea that is slow to take sides and quick to unravel its security relationship with the U.S. in the event of unification. Conversely, if Korea is becoming less sanguine over the

direct implications of China's rise, as many other regional actors are becoming, then likely Korea will actively diversify its economic and political relations while using the U.S. security alliance as a hedge against China.

The first section of this paper reviews the predictions of international relations theory for how surrounding states should respond to a rising power. The second section traces the arc of Sino-Korean relations since normalization to determine how they have been affected by three core concerns: security, economy, and values. The third section focuses on the period since the Global Financial Crisis to assess how Koreans' perceptions of China as a threat have shifted in the three issue areas. This analysis concludes with a discussion of future events that might suggest a change in Korea's course, such as its willingness to join security initiatives fiercely opposed by China, like ballistic missile defense, or a closer trilateral security relationship with Japan and the U.S. that is meant to deter Chinese revanchism. Studies by Sarah Kreps on elite consensus and Thomas Risse-Kappan on public opinion and domestic structure show that even in democracies, foreign policy and especially alliance decisions are often the purview of relatively insulated elites. Thus, although this paper looks at both public and elite perceptions of China over time, considerably more weight is given to elite perception in the predictions offered in the conclusion.

I. KOREA AND THE U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION

There is some debate as to the nature of competition between China and the U.S. Aaron Friedberg and other realists have argued that the two may engage in a "contest for supremacy" in Asia in which the balance rests largely on which country can woo greater support from regional actors, while liberals and liberal-institutionalists like John Ikenberry believe China can be peacefully socialized into the world order. Some see the potential for Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations," in which Korea is explicitly predicted to move closer to and join its large "Confucian Civilization" neighbor. Others support the hypothesis put forth by David Kang in "Getting Asia Wrong" in 2003 that China is neither revisionist nor imperial, but that its rise signals a return to a peaceful, hierarchical East Asian order dominated by China. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is only important that Koreans *perceive* a U.S.-China competition as existing and intensifying. Some experts on Northeast Asian security, like Chung Jae Ho in his 2007 book *Between Ally and Partner*, see this through traditional realist balance of power mechanisms, while others, like Lee Jung-nam in his 2012 working paper "Faltering Korea-China Relations with the Emergence of the G2 Era," forecast the emergence of a "G2," in which the U.S. and China alternatively cooperate and compete while rampaging over the interests of surrounding states. Concern over this competition frequently manifests in editorials from the major

daily papers in South Korea, and public opinion polls from 2012 by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies show that over eighty percent of Koreans believe the U.S.-China relationship is fundamentally competitive.

How should Korea respond to such a competition? Kang predicts that Korea will, like other actors, show deference to Chinese interests by refraining from controversial policies like missile defense. Looking at other regional actors' responses, Chung suggests that the most important determinants of balancing or bandwagoning behavior are the existence of a territorial dispute with China or a pre-existing alliance with the U.S., followed by the extent of economic dependency. Korea has no serious territorial dispute with China (although the partially-submerged Socotra Rock may one day achieve this distinction), but it is a U.S. ally; so its potential response is theoretically ambiguous. In *China's Rise and the Two Koreas*, Scott Snyder used the "strategic triangle" tool to assess Korea's response to the rise of China, arguing that with normalization Korea began shifting from a "stable marriage" relationship—alliance with the U.S. against China—toward a more "romantic triangle" during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, in which it alternates between the U.S. or China in pursuit of specific policies. Whether Korea will continue to seek a balance or play a larger balancing role will largely reflect its security concerns vis-à-vis China.

Surveying the literature on Sino-Korean relations yields two interesting insights. First, because South Koreans focus overwhelmingly on North Korea when considering security issues, separating Korean views on China from their broader views of the U.S.-ROK alliance is difficult. When South Korea and the U.S. are in lockstep on North Korea policy, Korean elites tend to emphasize the benefits of the alliance and downplay the risks of entrapment, while public views of the United States tend to be more favorable vis-à-vis China. When the two allies disagree on the best strategy for dealing with North Korea, South Koreans are more likely to distance themselves from the U.S. and seek balance in their relations. Second, although economic and political factors at first overwhelmed concerns about China's rise during the so-called "honeymoon" period, many of these positive trends have slowed or reversed as Koreans have grown worried over China's growing assertiveness and one-way support for North Korean poor behavior.

II. SINO-KOREAN RELATIONS: THE "HONEYMOON" PERIOD

Although the Sino-Korean relationship, since normalization in 1992, has not been without its irritants, many observers in the late 1990s and early to mid 2000s felt that most elements of the bilateral relationship improved over time. In particular, China was not generally viewed as a destabilizing military power. Indeed, a 2006 RAND Corporation study titled *Pacific Currents* found that many

Koreans believed China was enhancing regional stability through facilitating the four and six-party talks processes and helping to raise concerns over any step by Japan to become a "normal" military power. Historical, political, and minor economic controversies periodically roiled relations, but on the whole, China's economic rise was viewed favorably by a nation desperate to find new means of sustaining growth following the financial crisis of the late 1990s.

Sino-Korean Security Relations under the Liberal Korean Governments

In the immediate wake of normalization, Korea did not face very painful tradeoffs between its security and economic interests. This is because over the past two decades Korea has largely viewed China's rise only through the lens of stability on the Peninsula and North Korea's nuclear program. With the conventional balance on the Peninsula shifting in the South's favor during the 1990s and early 2000s, Seoul's security concerns increasingly focused on the North's nuclear program. Here, both elites and the larger public believed China was playing a positive role. Against the backdrop of generally tense U.S.-ROK relations over what Seoul viewed as Washington's hard-line policies, Snyder points out that the Roh administration often felt that its preferred policy of engagement aligned more closely with China's preference for stability on the Peninsula. China's support for referring the DPRK to the UN Security Council in 2003 reinforced this perception. In the aforementioned book, Chung reiterates that Korea at this time also believed China could play a useful role as a military and diplomatic counterweight to Japan. Both nations were concerned that conflicting historical interpretations and repeat trips to Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi would usher in a more militarized Japan.

Although South Korea took measures to ease tensions and demonstrate its military commitment to the ROK-U.S. alliance—notably by deploying forces to Iraq in 2004—this period was characterized by South Korea's efforts to increase its diplomatic flexibility, diversify its foreign relations, and increase its control over combined forces in Korea. A January 19, 2006 U.S.-ROK Joint Statement saw South Korea responding to U.S. attempts to regionalize its bilateral security relationship by stressing the "position that [the ROK] shall not be involved in a regional conflict… against the will of the Korean people." These events occurred even as tensions on the Peninsula were building with North Korea's nuclear program. On the one hand this may stem from long-standing and fundamentally divergent threat perceptions of North Korea, which Victor Cha has previously illustrated in his 1997 article "Realism, Liberalism, and the Durability of the U.S.-South Korean Alliance," but another key factor was Seoul's desire not to be entrapped in any potential competition as China began to catch up to the U.S. in relative power terms. Recognizing this fear, some Western and Korean analysts

posited that deepening economic relations with China might lead South Korea to adopt a neutral position in any crisis or, in the event of Korea's unification, seek to unravel U.S.-Korean security relations outright.

New Gains in Economic Relations

Even before normalization, South Korean firms, especially the *chaebols,* began investing heavily in China. They sought to benefit from cheap labor and establish themselves in China's burgeoning market. As Snyder notes, Korean foreign direct investment (FDI) accounted for nearly three-quarters of all FDI in Northeast China in the early 1990s. More importantly, the trade flows resulting from these investments led to structural surpluses that helped offset large trade deficits Korea was running against other countries at the time. Although many of these gains stalled temporarily as Korea dealt with the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, once China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 trade and investment growth were rapidly restored. By 2006, China was South Korea's largest trading partner. Despite occasional trade hiccups, such as the "Garlic Wars" tariff incident in 2000, and fears that its manufacturing base might be "hollowed out," South Korea increasingly viewed China's economic rise as a solution to its worries about slowing domestic growth. In contrast to this general optimism, some elites at this time were beginning to worry about economic over-dependence on China. Such concerns may have contributed to the Roh administration's sudden support for the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) as a means of economic diversification late in his term.

Portents of Future Discord: Culture Wars

Not all bilateral trends unfolded as positively as security and economic relations during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although the "softer" aspects of the relationship, such as shared culture and heritage, contributed to harmonious relations immediately following normalization, there was a sharp shift around 2004. Early 2000s public opinion polls indicate that the Korean population generally agreed that China's stance in the Six-Party Talks and Sino-Korean economic relations were net positives. Chung cited a 2003 *JoongAng Ilbo* polling that showed Koreans held more positive views of China than they did of America. This was in part because China as a foreign policy issue held little salience among a public more directly concerned with North Korea and U.S.-ROK bilateral relations. Although some opinion leaders, especially on the right, worried about how a future with China as the dominant Pacific power might be, it simply was not important enough to dominate the national conversation. When it came to potential military conflict, the population was more concerned that the U.S. might drag it into war than that it might need to rely on U.S. forces for security from China in the future.

This general optimism took a sharp hit in 2004 during a dispute over whether Goguryeo, which South Koreans view as one of the kingdoms among the fabled Three Kingdoms Period, was more properly part of Korean or Chinese heritage. The dispute had been dormant since 2002 but was reignited in Korean media after the Chinese Foreign Ministry delisted some references to Korea from its website. As Snyder details, support for strengthening political ties with China fell from over 80 percent to 40 percent between summer 2004 and January 2005. In a sign that the Korean public views ROK-U.S. and ROK-Chinese relations in somewhat zero-sum terms, favorable feelings toward the U.S. rose over the same period. In addition to these historical disputes, which many Koreans believe raise questions of how responsible a dominant China might be, Koreans grow cyclically more wary of China when they hear of increasing Chinese economic permeation in North Korea or hear of Chinese refoulement of North Korean refugees and other human rights violations. More generally, as South Korea's democracy matures, the fact that China remains an authoritarian state interested in allowing only economic, not political, freedom is bound to grate against Korean sensitivities.

The Balance of Security, Economy, and Values

On balance, general nonchalance toward China as a military threat and the sense of opportunity in China's economic rise helped to crowd out disagreements over human rights or history. Between 1992 and 2008, although portions of Korean society might have objected to specific Chinese human rights practices or historical interpretations, few government or social elites were going to interfere with high-opportunity business dealings, absent concrete security concerns. South Korea thus avoided the hard choices now facing many countries in the region between closer economic ties with China and the pursuit of security interests.

III. THE DILEMMA INTENSIFIES: KOREA'S RESPONSE TO CHINA AFTER THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

Koreans since 2008 are not alone in worrying about intensifying competition between the U.S. and China. U.S. allies and neutral actors are each attempting in varying degrees to balance their economic interests in China's growth against fears that its growth may disrupt the regional stability that America has historically underwritten. Its status as a U.S. ally has led analysts like Chung, writing in his 2009 article "East Asia Responds to the Rise of China," to predict some form of security hedging, but Korea, to date, has adopted a carefully balanced stance. Although some of the trends mentioned previously lead to worsening Sino-Korean relations by the mid-2000s, on the whole bilateral relations were stable, and Korea was determined to continue using China's rise

for its own economic growth. From 2008 onward, however, how the Korean elite and public perceived China's role in Northeast Asian security shifted rapidly, while China's growth as an economic competitor for South Korea in important areas made economic exchange less beneficial.

New Outlooks on the Security Implications of China's Rise

After 2008, several key variables shifted in ways that contributed to new and growing concerns in South Korea. First, the election of a conservative president in late 2007 meant a likely shift away from engagement in the Blue House's orientation toward the North. This would create tension between the preferred polices of Seoul and Beijing, while enhancing the need to improve relations with Washington.

Second, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis rapidly accelerated the speed with which China was closing the relative power gap with the United States. The crisis also acted as a shock to the system, alerting foreign policy elites from Washington to Tokyo of underlying trends.

Third, Koreans began to realize the potential risks of China's growth during a two-year period of increased Chinese assertiveness from 2010 to 2012, a period analyzed by Michael Swaine in his 2010 article, "Perceptions of an Assertive China." Han Suk-hee points out in a 2012 publication "South Korea Seeks to Balance Relations with China and the United States" that part of this was a backlash against Chinese criticism of the U.S.-ROK alliance, which some Chinese deemed to be anachronistic. On North Korea, although China supported the extension of some sanctions via the United Nations Security Council following April and May 2009 ballistic missile and nuclear tests, it opposed other, harsher measures while continuing to provide broad economic aid to North Korea. With North Korea continuing to defy commitments to denuclearize made in the 2005 Six-Party Talks, the view that China was actively and positively contributing to the process deteriorated. Bae Jeong-ho notes in "China's Rise and the Korean Peninsula" ("*Jungguk-ui busang-gwa Hanbando*") that China's obstructionist view of the 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan* and ambivalence toward the Yeongpyeong Island shelling raised further fears in Seoul that China was not acting responsibly. Elite perception held that the ensuing regional response, including the U.S. "pivot to Asia" in 2011, was a direct response to Chinese "belligerence."

Popular and Elite Assessments of the New Security Environment

Korean elites and the general population took from these events several insights that seriously exacerbated the perceived dilemma between economic benefits from ROK-China relations and potential damage to security interests. First,

Chinese behavior and the U.S. response meant that U.S.-China competition, in Korea's view, was heating up. Analyzing public opinion polls from 2007-2010, Jung-Nam Lee in the same "Faltering" article above finds that the Korean public increasingly believes that the U.S.-China gap is closing, leading to increased competition between the two. Interviews conducted by the author in 2012 found that some high-ranking South Koreans fear that as this competition grows, so too will Washington's demands for Seoul to join in initiatives perceived as hostile by Beijing. This gives rise to fear of entrapment, and, at a more mundane level, increases South Korea's concern that it will be called on to uphold a larger share of Northeast Asia's defense burden, even as it was already "barely keeping its head above water" following the Global Financial Crisis.

Second, Koreans across the political spectrum came to believe that China was either indifferent toward or outright opposed to Korean unification. A liberal party assemblyman and high official in the National Assembly expressed skepticism that China would contribute in any process that sought Korean unification. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, a conservative National Assembly member argued China was opposed to unification for strategic reasons. Elaborating on this strategic rationale, Bae points out that China's desire above all for stability devolves into support for a status quo of disunity. He also puts forth a more widely held belief that China benefits from North Korea's status as a "buffer state" and as a form of leverage in the broader U.S.-China relationship. In short, the fear that China fundamentally opposes Korean unification—a national goal with bipartisan support—has marred some of the 1990s' and middle 2000s' optimism Koreans felt toward China on security issues.

Third, the Korean population as a whole has grown more nervous about the role China might play in the region. Although Pew Global Attitudes polling finds that Koreans believe that the current regional security guarantor, the U.S., takes Korea's interests into account when formulating foreign policy, 86 percent believe China's rise as a military power is bad for Korea, and a larger portion believe China is more likely to be an enemy than a friend. Indeed, Asan International Trends Polling finds that as of 2012, the Korean public is more likely to believe China represents a military threat than the U.S. public is. Although many of these perceived threats continue to revolve around North Korea, they are broadening in scope. For example, a representative of the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade interviewed in November 2012 referred explicitly to territorial disputes in the South China Sea as constituting a security threat to the ROK's energy supply. He explained that the threat is in part amplified by the view that current Chinese behavior in the South China Sea could indicate future conduct.

Growing Ambivalence toward Economic Relations

As Koreans become increasingly concerned about the military and security aspects of China's rise, shifting public views of China's *economic* rise mean remunerative concerns become less of a counterweight. In contrast to 2002 polling, presented in Chung's *Between Ally an Partner*, showing 66 percent of South Koreans hold a positive view of China, Pew Global Attitudes polls in 2007, 2008, and 2010 each found Koreans increasingly divided on the benefits of China's growth, with the majority viewing it as detrimental to Korea's economy. Similar polling in 2012 by the Asan Institute found that 53 percent of Koreans believe China represents an economic threat, while only 44 percent see it as a source of opportunity. This is despite China's position as Korea's leading trading partner in both imports (16.5 percent of total) and exports (24.2 percent of total) in 2012, according to WTO. In part, this is due to the rising share of Chinese manufactures among Korean imports and concern that China will increasingly challenge South Korea's economic competitiveness. More importantly, it may reflect the unequal distribution of gains from trade. The same Asan Institute poll found that 91 percent of Koreans believed most economic benefits went to only a small segment of society. However, when broken down by age, the poll showed younger respondents tended to believe China held more economic opportunity than older ones. Thus, Koreans as a whole feel ambivalent toward economic relations with China. The same National Assembly members mentioned earlier each independently reiterated the importance of Chinese economic relations, and whatever concerns Korea may have over China's economic rise, it will launch official negotiations toward an ROK-China free trade agreement in May 2012.

When Autocracies and Democracies Fail to Mesh: Clashes over Values

Nearly every joint statement by the U.S. and ROK within the past four years has included some formulation of 2012's "common values of commitment to freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law," serving as the bedrock of the alliance. ROK-China relations are weaker on shared values, with only half of Asan poll respondents identifying common values and interests between the two. China's authoritarian nature continues to unnerve South Korea, and its unbending view on North Korean refugees as economic rather than political refugees continues to frustrate South Koreans' sense of justice and concern for familial ties. More importantly, China is also demonstrating its willingness to antagonize South Korea directly. The alleged torture of South Korean human rights activist Kim Young-hwan at the hands of Chinese authorities in Dalian in March through May of 2012 elicited a harsh response from both the South Korean government, which demanded an investigation, and opinion leaders. For example, an editorial published in July 26, 2012 by *Dong-a Ilbo* derided "China

[as] not a Civilized Nation." All of this increases ROK distrust and hostile threat perception of China, even absent any direct link to Korean security interests in North Korea.

IV. THE BALANCE: WHAT SOUTH KOREA'S RESPONSE MEANS FOR THE U.S.

Although the above analysis shows a general decline in ROK-Chinese relations since the mid-2000s, when poor U.S.-ROK relations contributed to serious concerns over the alliance's future, U.S. strategists eager to enlist Korea in any broader strategy in East Asia should be wary of ongoing Korean ambivalence toward the U.S. "pivot to Asia" or "rebalancing." During interviews in Seoul in November of 2012, high ranking U.S. State Department officials were quick to dismiss concerns of the ROK "walking away" from the alliance – a view held by a small minority of left-leaning academics. Given Asan polling showing 98 percent of South Koreans in support of the alliance, this is true. But, the key phrase one hears during interviews with Korean academics, policymakers, and even the general public is "balance." Despite some economic irritants and concerns over China's policy toward North Korea, South Koreans are still eager to partake in Chinese growth.

That Korea should seek "balance" in any broader regional order has been reiterated across the political spectrum by policymakers and is supported by polls, cited by Lee, showing that when asked whether Korea should stay neutral in a Sino-U.S. conflict, 62 percent of Koreans responded that they should. The ongoing desire for balance despite rapid growth in Chinese military spending is strong evidence that Koreans still view China as a security threat primarily because of its conflicting interests vis-à-vis North Korea, and not because they fear China might pose a direct threat in the near term. In the context of a still-divided Korea, then, South Korea is likely to temper its behavior to comport with Chinese interests when it comes to regional security frameworks. U.S. embassy personnel pointed out during personal interviews that since Korean elites view economic cooperative frameworks as incorporating security interests, as they did with the KORUS FTA, they express concern over joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership as long as China is not involved. Conversely, they are eager to pursue a Korea-China FTA as a means of constraining China. The U.S. should therefore expect only half-hearted Korean interest in the economic portions of its pivot.

Koreans are deeply distrustful of Chinese influence over North Korea and are three times more likely than Chinese citizens to believe China would intervene in a conflict on the peninsula, according to Lee. Thus, the flip side of Korean security concerns focusing on North Korea is that despite a willingness to bow to Chinese interests in certain areas, South Korea will likely continue to prioritize

security on the peninsula above even Chinese concerns, as it did when it conducted joint exercises with the U.S. in the Yellow Sea over China's objections or when it launched a new program to extend the range of ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities to include Beijing. A controversial policy initiative that falls between U.S. regional security goals and South Korea's security concerns over China is BMD. Korea continues to take halting steps toward such a program, but it has yet to commit fully. Although some argue that South Korea can convince China that the BMD program is only meant to counter North Korea's missile program, a decision to proceed over China's strong objection would indicate a substantial shift in South Korea's thinking about China's rise. It is likely to develop only in response to overt acts of aggression by China against other regional actors. On the other hand, a decision by the new Korean administration to distance itself further from or even criticize the U.S. pivot would indicate a drastic shift in the other direction.

V. CONCLUSION: HYPOTHESIZING A UNIFIED KOREA

If U.S.-China competition does not abate by the time Korea is unified, what will unification mean for the U.S.-Korea alliance? Looking at the three arcs of China-ROK relations provides some tentative answers to this overriding question. In the security realm, a key takeaway is that Korea is primarily concerned about China's rise only as it relates to North Korea. Although the 2012 Asan polls show that 63 percent of Koreans believe China is the most likely country to pose a post-reunification threat, those polled could only select between Japan, Russia, China, and the U.S. Such a poll cannot indicate how likely Koreans think China is to pose a threat. Much would depend then on how reunification comes about and China's attitude toward it. If China were to support a gradual process of unification through confederation or federation and to recognize the border on the Yalu and Tumen Rivers, it would alleviate the principal source of strategic antagonism with South Korea. In this case, a unified government in Seoul would be hard-pressed to find compelling reasons beyond institutional inertia to sustain the U.S.-Korea alliance. If, on the other hand, unification occurred through North Korea's collapse or even as the result of an escalating conflict in which the U.S. played a key role, South Korea would likely support continuing the alliance, especially if it viewed China as continuing to fight for the status quo.

On the other hand, ongoing cultural and value-based antipathies also mean South Korea is unlikely to follow the bandwagoning path predicted by analysts like David Kang. The U.S.-Korea alliance has been the bedrock of South Korean security thinking for six decades. Korea would only be likely to side against the U.S. in a major competition if China itself had ceased to be an autocratic state and developed a similar value system as the one Koreans hold today. The prevailing trends in Northeast Asia indicate that Korea will pursue its "balanced" path even after unification.

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