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US, China militaries hold exercise to build trust

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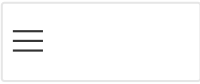
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Chinese militaries on Friday wrapped up a modest disaster relief exercise hailed as a tentative step in building trust between armed forces that often view each other as adversaries. (AP Photo/Peter Parks, Pool) (/ AP)

By CHRISTOPHER BODEEN, ASSOCIATED PRESS NOV. 29, 2012 | 9:49 PM



CHENGDU, China — The U.S. and Chinese militaries on Friday wrapped up a modest disaster-relief exercise hailed as a tentative trust-building step amid growing suspicions between the Asia-Pacific region's largest armed forces.

While not a full-fledged operation, the two-day exercise at People's Liberation Army barracks outside the city of Chengdu consisted of U.S. and Chinese officers sitting around a table facing a flat-panel video screen and discussing how they would respond to an earthquake in a fictional third country.

Though this was the eighth meeting to discuss disaster relief, it was the first time both sides discussed a joint response to a simulated disaster. The leading officers called that a step forward in building familiarity and trust.

U.S. Major General Stephen Lyons said the exercise began the groundwork for the day when the two militaries will operate side-by-side in an actual humanitarian operation.

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forces respond, then indeed we'll find ourselves working together in the field," Lyons said in comments to reporters.

While Washington and Beijing have talked about boosting military cooperation for more than a decade, distrust runs high and disagreements over Taiwan, North Korea and China's assertive claims to disputed territories in the East and South China seas remain potential flashpoints. China's robust military buildup and Washington's decision to redeploy more weaponry and troops to the Asia-Pacific region have added to the tensions.

The modest scope of the table-top simulation underscores the underlying hesitation and distrust on both sides, particularly in Beijing, which tends to view military exchanges as a form of diplomatic leverage to be severed at times of tension.

"It's worth pursuing, but expectations should be modest," said Denny Roy, an expert on the Chinese military at the University of Hawaii's East-West Center.

This year's exchange comes as China has been flexing its military muscle and raising regional tensions. Last week China staged the first successful landing of planes on its newly

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country.”

Hardware aside, China has been ratcheting up tensions by engaging in more aggressive tactics in recent months and thereby unnerving neighbors and the U.S.

Chinese coastal patrol and fisheries ships have pushed the Philippines away from a disputed South China Sea shoal and harassed Japanese coast guard vessels near contested East China Sea islands. U.S. naval and aerial reconnaissance close to China’s shores has at times been challenged by Chinese ships and planes, risking clashes.

This week, southern Hainan province, which administers or claims to administer the South China Sea islands China holds or wants to, approved laws giving the police force the right to search vessels that intrude in Chinese waters. The move raised concerns about whether China would seek to block normal maritime traffic through the South China Sea, waters vital to world trade.

Aware of the potential for conflict between the militaries, both sides have in recent years tried to find ways to cooperate. Their armed forces have conducted joint anti-piracy drills in the Gulf of

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senior fellow with the Center for Naval Analysis.

Asia is home to more natural disasters every year than any other part of the world, and the U.S. and Chinese militaries have proved vital in responding to tragedies such as the 2008 Wenquan earthquake that struck in the mountains outside Chengdu, and last year's massive Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, said Allen L. Clark, senior program development specialist at the Pacific Disaster Center in Honolulu Hawaii.

“The U.S. military has been vital in responding to disasters so it makes perfect sense for it to continue coordinating and training with other nations’ militaries,” Clark told The Associated Press at a forum organized by the East-West Center.

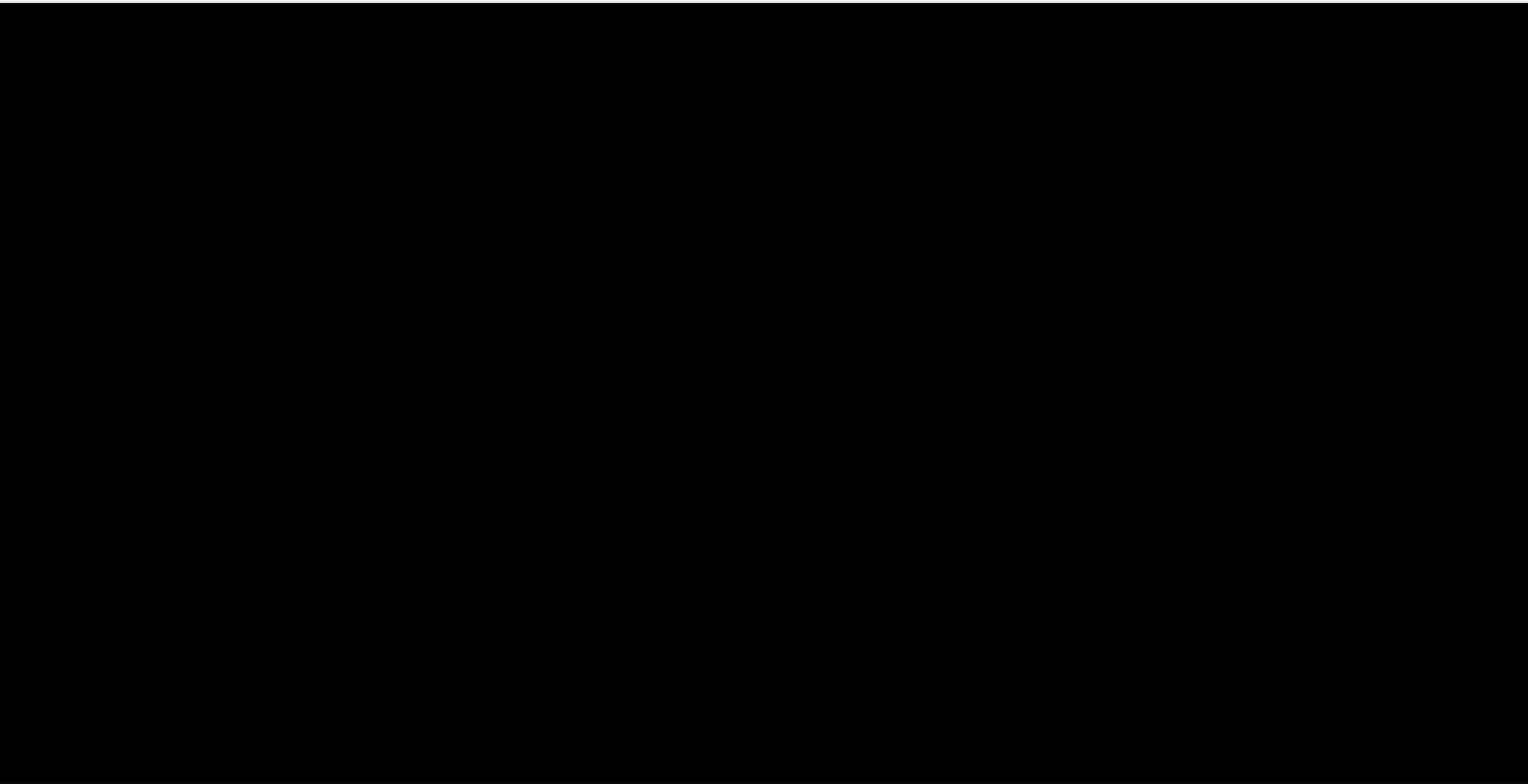
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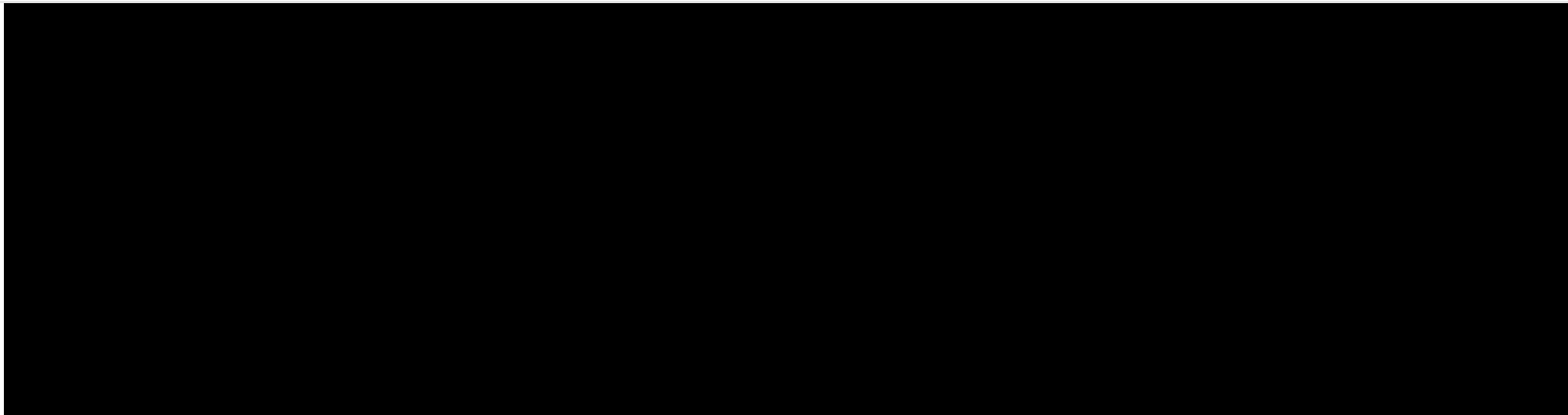
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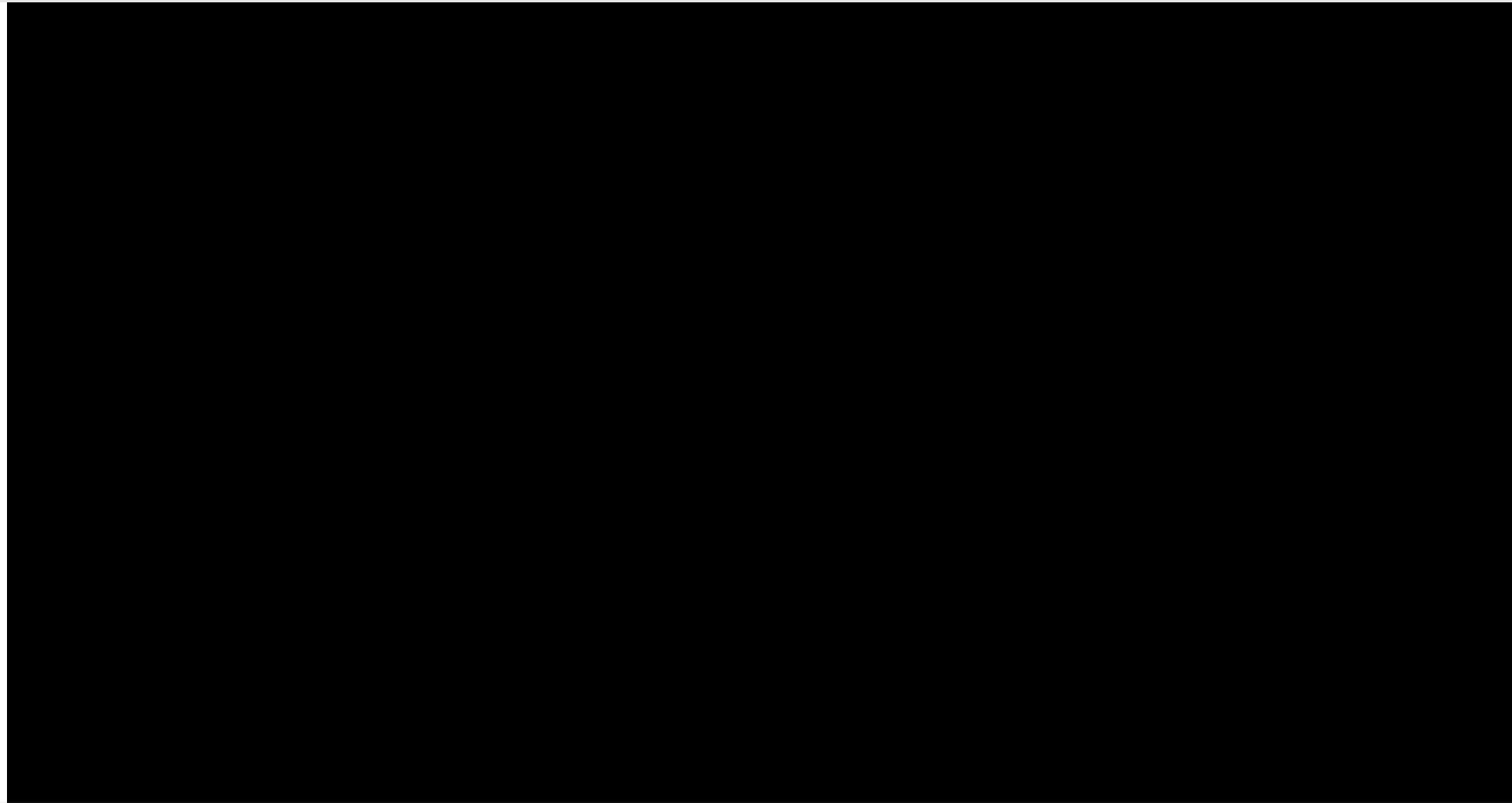
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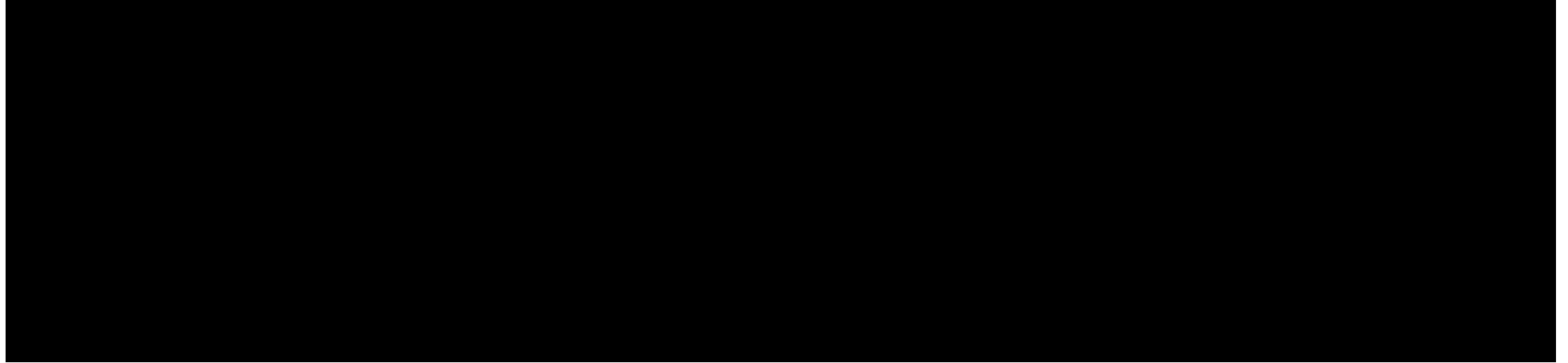
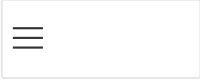
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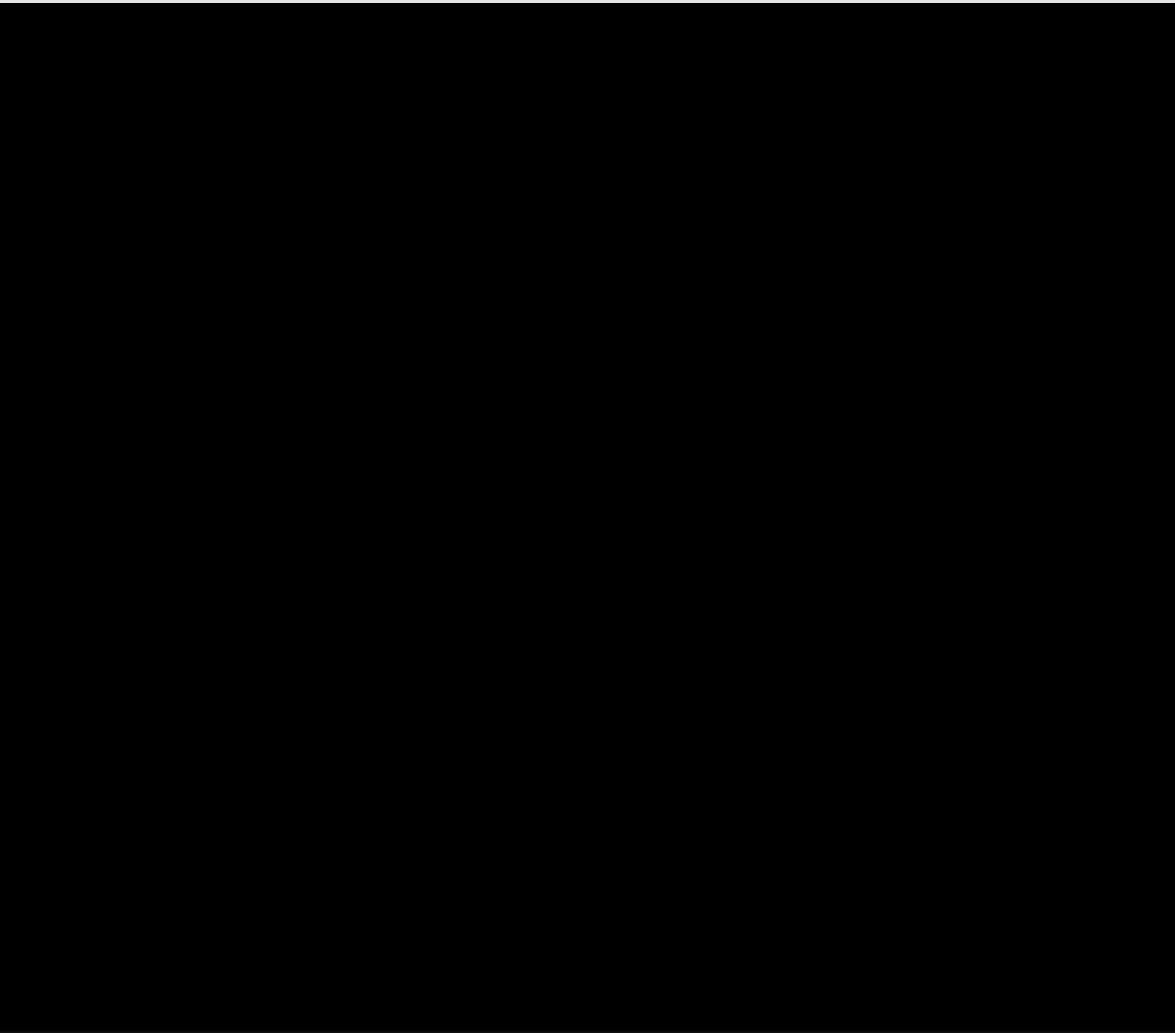
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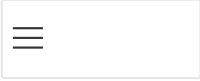
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