

THE ESCALATING PAK-INDIA DILEMMA AMID STRATEGIC AND INTERNAL TURMOIL

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14961749>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
08 November , 2024	08 December,2024	23 December,2024	31 December, 2024

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the widening imbalance in nuclear capabilities between Pakistan and India and how it exacerbates the nuclear dilemma in Southern Asia. India's modernization of its nuclear arsenal has prompted Pakistan to fortify its own deterrent amidst domestic instability. It seeks to highlight contributing factors that worsen the dilemma such as internal conflicts, heightened nationalism, terrorism, history of mistrust, and civilian control, or the lack thereof in Pakistan's case. The complexity of this intense rivalry has perpetuated the cycle of action and reaction, balancing and under balancing, which been examined through the lens of neo-classical realism. The findings reveal that the volatility surrounding the nuclear dilemma is further amplified by the presence and testing of nuclear weapons. The recent successful test of India's Agni-V missile, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, has been met with concern by Pakistan for undermining its minimum deterrence thereby raising tensions between the two nuclear rivals.

Keywords: Nuclear Dilemma; Deterrence; Arms race; South Asia; Pakistan; India

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan and India face each other as regional neighbors, nuclear-armed states, and oftentimes, adversaries. A historical rivalry, unmatched in antagonism and unresolved strife; however imbalanced their capabilities may be. Since the partition of India, the two countries have been spiraling into a complex and uncertain relationship, largely owing to the dispute over Kashmir's territory¹, a major source of unnerving confrontation. However, with time, more factors began to emerge that threatened security in the region including militant groups, insurgency in

Kashmir, cross-border terrorism, water disputes, and ideological differences.

Both countries acquired nuclear weapons in 1974 and 1998 which further fueled regional instability and tensions, cementing South Asia, as a nuclear hotspot. Since then, the threat of nuclear confrontation has hung above Pakistan and India, looming over their accidental escalations, and miscalculations, promising devastating consequences.

To grasp the complexities of the nuclear dilemma, present in South Asia, examining the deterrence strategies implemented by the two nations is a necessity as it uncovers which nation reigns dominance over the other. Pakistan, traditionally the weaker power in conventional military terms, has embraced a doctrine of "minimum credible

¹ Hoyt, Timothy. 2003. "Politics, Proximity and Paranoia: The Evolution of Kashmir as a Nuclear Flashpoint." *India Review* 2 (3): 117-44

deterrence²," emphasizing the dire need for a swift and devastating nuclear response to any large-scale Indian attack. On the other hand, India assumes a more nuanced "credible minimum deterrence" strategy, aiming to deter a full-spectrum of Pakistani attacks, both conventional and nuclear in nature. However, India has upheld the no-first-use (NFU) policy³, reserving the right to employ its nuclear arsenal solely for retaliation in case of a nuclear attack on its forces or territory.

We begin by examining the historical context that shaped Pakistan's military development. Security concerns stemming from its geographical location and ongoing border disputes with India have significantly influenced its defense strategy. We then analyze the specific areas of asymmetry, encompassing military size, defense spending, and technological advancement. India's larger armed forces, higher defense budget, and increasingly sophisticated weaponry create challenges for Pakistan's national security.

Furthermore, India's "Cold Start Doctrine" emphasizing swift offensive maneuvers adds to Pakistan's uncertainty. The fear of rapid territorial gains by India could pressure Pakistan to lower the threshold for nuclear use in a crisis. Additionally, India's investments in advanced weaponry like missile defense systems raise concerns about Pakistan's ability to guarantee a successful nuclear response. This perception of a potentially blunted

nuclear strike could weaken the credibility of Pakistan's deterrence.

The potential erosion of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence has significant consequences for regional stability. It could increase crisis instability, fuel an arms race, and undermine regional security architecture which in turn could evoke irrationality in decision-making before and during attacks.

Observing Pakistan's nuclear program, we can come to a conclusion that it poses as a potent symbol of national strength and a cornerstone of its deterrence strategy in the face of a historically tense relationship with India. However, the control and management of this sensitive arsenal raise concerns about the influence of the military establishment, particularly within the context of Pakistan's praetorian tradition⁴ which regularly undermines public discourse and consensus.

A praetorian state is characterized by the dominance of the military establishment in national politics. The military, often wielding significant political influence and economic power, becomes a powerful actor beyond its core function of national defense. This dominance can have a profound impact on civilian control, decision-making processes, and ultimately, national security strategy; which goes to show how Pakistan's history is marked by a complex relationship between civilian and military leadership⁵. Since its independence in 1947, the military has played a pivotal role in national politics, staging multiple coups and exercising significant influence over decision-making. This praetorian tradition has manifested in various ways, including the development of a powerful military-industrial complex and the pervasive influence of the military in national security and domestic policies.

The intersection of Pakistan's praetorian tradition and its nuclear program raises concerns about transparency, accountability, and civilian

² "Minimum credible deterrence" and "credible minimum deterrence" are terms used in official Indian and Pakistani defense documents, respectively. See: "India's Nuclear Doctrine" (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2003) and "Pakistan's Policy on Nuclear Deterrence" (Government of Pakistan, 2012).

³ Masood Haider, "Islamabad Refuses to Accept 'No First Strike' Doctrine," DAWN.COM, May 30, 2002, <https://www.dawn.com/news/38860/islamabad-refuses-to-accept-no-first-strike-doctrine>

⁴ Narang, Vipin. 2014. "Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era." Princeton University Press.

⁵ Shah, Aqil. 2009. "Military Control in Pakistan: The Parallel State by Mazhar Aziz." Political Science Quarterly. Oxford University Press (OUP).

oversight⁶. The military establishment, particularly the powerful army, is believed to maintain a tight grip over the control, command, and custody of nuclear weapons. The opacity surrounding Pakistan's nuclear decision-making processes and the limited role of civilian institutions fuel anxieties about potential for miscalculation or the possibility of rogue actors within the military establishment gaining access to nuclear weapons.

Taking all the above into consideration, this research article will explore potential avenues for strengthening civilian control over Pakistan's nuclear program, promoting greater transparency in decision-making processes, and fostering international cooperation on nuclear security measures. By addressing these challenges, Pakistan can work towards mitigating the risks associated with a praetorian structure and ensure the continued stability of its nuclear deterrence posture.

Public perception pertaining to the legitimacy of governments⁷ also plays into internal instability. In the context of the nuclear dilemma, particularly in countries like Pakistan facing domestic challenges, public discontent can exacerbate tensions and heighten the risk of miscalculation.

When a government's legitimacy is eroded by the public, its ability to make rational and measured decisions in times of crisis comes into question. Public pressure, fueled by anxieties or a sense of injustice, can push leaders towards adopting more aggressive postures to deflect criticism or appease nationalist sentiments. This can lead to impulsive decision-making in the nuclear realm, potentially increasing the risk of accidental escalation or a preemptive strike based on misperceptions.

Increased public unrests can separate the public from nuclear decision-making processes more than ever before. If the government is perceived as

failing and incompetent to uphold national security interests, the military establishment may feel emboldened to assert greater control over nuclear weapons, potentially bypassing established protocols and civilian oversight mechanisms. This lack of transparency and accountability can increase anxieties and fuel regional instability.

This research article elucidates how India's advancements, the inflated gap in asymmetric abilities and internal factors might erode Pakistan's nuclear deterrence. India's growing conventional military superiority, particularly in air force and missile defense, challenges Pakistan's ability to inflict sufficient damage in response to an Indian attack, leading the former to believe that even a limited Indian incursion renders nuclear retaliation. To address the interplay between internal challenges and asymmetric abilities, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Regional insecurity, exacerbated by factors such as terrorism and internal conflicts, will heighten the risk of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons in South Asia.

H2: The perceived security threats arising from the growing nuclear asymmetry will lead to a deepening of mistrust and suspicion between India and Pakistan

Literature Review

The nuclear rivalry between Pakistan and India presents a significant threat to regional and global security. This review examines the existing literature on this complex issue, focusing on the growing military asymmetry between the two nations and its impact on the nuclear dilemma. Understanding the historical context is crucial. The bloody partition of 1947, which sowed the seeds of mistrust and rivalry; security concerns stemming from these historical grievances have significantly influenced both nations' defense strategies (Ganguly, 2002).

Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1998, following India's tests in 1974, marked a critical turning point. The Kashmir dispute explores the role of the unresolved Kashmir conflict in driving nuclear proliferation. Recent escalations by the hands of India have revoked the special status enjoyed by Kashmir, this has caused massive outcry in Pakistan. Amid the rising trend of Hindu nationalism, the government is capitalizing on anti-Muslim sentiment to further its agenda in

⁶ United States Department of State. 2022. "PAKISTAN 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT."

⁷ Arif, Imran, and Nabamita Dutta. 2024. "Legitimacy of Government and Governance." *Journal of Institutional Economics*. Cambridge University Press (CUP).

Kashmir. Even though Pakistan condemned India's action in revoking Article 370 as illegal, and has called on the international community to heed, India still stands firm that this is an internal matter (Ming, 2019).

The growing military asymmetry between India and Pakistan is a major concern. Rajesh examines the widening gap in conventional military capabilities and its impact on deterrence stability. The potential consequences of this asymmetry are explored in works which highlights the influence of the powerful Pakistani military establishment (Rajesh, 2016).

Domestic factors also significantly influence nuclear policy. The complex interplay between nationalism, public opinion, and civil-military relations in both Pakistan and India could trigger change in nuclear doctrines; these domestic drivers could influence policies (Rajagopalan, 2022). Public opinions and strong nationalist rhetoric at times advocate nuclear threats while nuclear use remains under strict civilian control and the government often demonstrates a significant degree of restraint (Joshi, 2022)

Unlike India, where nuclear use is under strict civilian control, the nature of civil-military relations in Pakistan in effect gives the military significant power over both operational controls and decisions on nuclear use, or, as suggested by Vipin Narang, "Pakistan's nuclear command-and-control architecture and decision making occurs within a clearly praetorian structure" (Narang, 2014).

An additional risk factor is that the damage limitation approach may increase first-strike instability because in a crisis Pakistan will face pressure to use its nuclear forces before an Indian counterforce attack neutralizes them (Larsen, 2024).

India is investing in various new missiles, with an emphasis on accuracy and promptness. An important development is the new solid fuel medium-range ballistic missile: the Agni-P missile. Analysts argue that, considering the system's range, accuracy, canisterization, and mobility, the missile is likely being developed for a counterforce mission against Pakistan (Timothy, Joseph, 2021). Pakistan has adopted a nuclear doctrine of what is termed "full-spectrum deterrence" (FSD), which requires a nuclear force of sufficient size with a variety of nuclear weapons and delivery means, including tactical nuclear weapons, that are

capable of striking a range of Indian targets, from countervalue to counterforce, in order to strengthen its deterrent against an enemy of superior conventional and presumably, nuclear capabilities (Khan, 2015).

It is observed that military modernization in India, both quality and quantity, compels India to adopt an offensive doctrinal posture against Pakistan. Meanwhile, Pakistan, cognizant of acute conventional asymmetry with India, tries to maintain deterrence and balance of power by operationalizing the policy of full spectrum deterrence. This policy posture is central to Pakistan's strategic thinking and a suitable option for containing India's Cold Start Doctrine. However, after the Balakot Airstrikes in 2019, the character of war in South Asia has changed ("India's 'Non-Military Pre-Emptive' Strike on Pakistan: What We Know, What We Don't Know, 2019). With its strong conventional military forces acquired with the support of the US, Russia, France, and Israel, India is challenging Pakistan's strategic calculus and seeking a limited war under a nuclear overhang.

India-Pakistan relations fit into Jervis' first world, filled with hostile conflicts and the arms race. Sino-Indian relations fulfill the intense security dilemma without significantly affecting their power accumulation. This explains the highly hostile relations between India and Pakistan and the plausibility of Sino-Indian antagonistic cooperation (Saalman, 2020). Even though both cases are under the same circumstances of nuclear tension.

The military tensions between India and Pakistan, which heightened over the past few years, have eased substantially since both countries agreed to adhere to the Ceasefire Agreement at the end of February 2021. However, the militancy in Indian Kashmir persists and still enjoys Pakistan's support, albeit not comparable with what Islamabad did in the 1990s. The Pulwama crisis in 2019 amply demonstrated that a serious terror attack perpetrated by such militants can trigger a serious crisis between both countries even today (Kurita, 2022). Thus, there is a need for the international community to urge India and Pakistan to take measures to prevent the materialization of the risks of nuclear escalation, which can arise from their changing nuclear postures (Kinanti, 2023).

Because of this conventional asymmetry, the conflict in South Asia could escalate from sub-conventional to strategic. Given Pakistan's limited resources, the most realistic course of action is to implement an integrated deterrence policy based on the credible minimum deterrence policy. Integrated deterrence will increase the chances of deterrent stability in both the conventional and nuclear domains, strengthening Pakistan's conventional and nuclear military credibility (Abdullah, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

This research delves into the precarious nuclear standoff between Pakistan and India, employing neo-classical realism as the analytical lens. The long history of conflict and mistrust between these South Asian neighbors has cast a dark shadow over regional security, with nuclear weapons acting as a potent and terrifying element in this equation. Through a meticulous examination of the existing dynamics and the application of key neo-classical realist concepts, this research strives to illuminate the intricacies of the Pak-India nuclear dilemma and its potential consequences.

Neo-classical realism, an influential strand of international relations theory, provides a framework for understanding the behavior of states in the international system. It posits that states, as the primary actors, are driven by a fundamental concern for their own security and survival in an anarchic environment where there is no overarching authority to enforce order. National interest, therefore, takes center stage, guiding a state's foreign policy decisions. Power, particularly military power, serves as the essential currency in this system, with states constantly seeking to maintain or enhance their relative power positions through various means, including alliances, arms buildups, and strategic maneuvering. The concept of the balance of power becomes paramount, as states strive to prevent any one actor from achieving dominance. However, this pursuit of power can lead to a security dilemma, where actions taken by one state to bolster its security, such as acquiring nuclear weapons, can be perceived as a threat by others, triggering a chain reaction of mistrust and potentially escalating tensions.

The case of Pakistan and India exemplifies the precariousness of the security dilemma within the

context of nuclear weapons. Both nations possess nuclear arsenals, with estimates suggesting roughly 150-160 warheads for Pakistan and around 100-120 for India (SIPRI, 2023). This nuclear overhang casts a long shadow over their relationship, constantly fueling anxieties and suspicions. The historical baggage of partition, unresolved territorial disputes like Kashmir, and ongoing cross-border violence contribute to a climate of hostility. Both states view nuclear weapons as essential deterrents against potential aggression from the other, subscribing to a doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). However, the very presence of these weapons intensifies the security dilemma. Each side's nuclear weapons program is perceived by the other as a direct threat, prompting further military modernization and potentially lowering the threshold for conflict.

Neo-classical realism sheds light on the motivations driving Pakistan and India's nuclear posture. Both states prioritize their national security above all else, viewing nuclear weapons as a safeguard against potential existential threats. The power imbalance between India, with its larger conventional military, and Pakistan fuels the latter's pursuit of nuclear deterrence. From Pakistan's perspective, nuclear weapons serve as a great equalizer, deterring a potential full-scale Indian invasion. India, on the other hand, views its nuclear arsenal as a necessary counterweight to Pakistan's program and a deterrent against potential Pakistani use of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict. This dynamic creates a dangerous cycle of action and reaction, where each side's nuclear advancements are seen as a justification for the other's.

The concept of the balance of power also plays a crucial role in understanding the Pak-India nuclear dilemma. Both states are acutely aware of the need to maintain a credible deterrent against the other. Pakistan's pursuit of tactical nuclear weapons, which are designed for use on the battlefield, can be seen as an attempt to counter India's conventional military superiority. India, in turn, has embarked on programs to develop ballistic missile defense systems and expand its nuclear arsenal, aiming to maintain its perceived advantage. However, this relentless pursuit of a balance of power can be a precarious strategy. The more each side builds up its nuclear arsenal, the greater the risk of accidental escalation or

miscalculation. A minor skirmish or misperception could potentially trigger a catastrophic nuclear exchange.

The Question of Anarchy

Neo-classical realism sheds light on the precarious nuclear standoff between Pakistan and India, highlighting how the anarchic nature of the international system fuels the security dilemma. In the absence of a central authority, states prioritize self-interest and survival, viewing each other with suspicion. This dynamic plays out in the Pak-India case in several ways. The lack of a world government breeds mistrust. Each action, from military modernization to alliances, is seen as a potential threat by the other. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where both sides feel compelled to constantly build up their military capabilities, including nuclear weapons.

Consequently, with no central authority to regulate power, both Pakistan and India are driven by a desire to maintain a balance of power in the region⁸. This obsession can lead to an arms race, particularly in nuclear weapons development, as each side strives to gain an advantage over the other. Anarchy undoubtedly plays a role in the Pak-India nuclear dilemma. However, it's likely not the sole driver. A comprehensive understanding requires a holistic approach that incorporates both international system dynamics and domestic political realities.

Neoclassical Realism: The Domestic Problem

A more comprehensive elaboration of the Pak-India nuclear dilemma can only be plausible if the domestic problems were taken into consideration. While generally, Neoclassical realism prioritizes the international system and related power structures including distribution of power and capabilities, balance of power and balance of threat. Both Pakistan and India are shaped by powerful nationalist narratives that emphasize historical grievances and perceived threats from

the other. These narratives can fuel public support for nuclear weapons programs and make compromise on security issues more difficult.

Moreover, Public opinion on nuclear weapons is complex and can vary depending on the perceived security threats and the level of trust in the government's ability to handle them. While some citizens may view nuclear weapons as a source of national pride and deterrence, others may express anxieties about the risks of accidental escalation or nuclear terrorism⁹. Understanding public opinion dynamics in both countries is crucial for gauging domestic pressure on nuclear policy decisions. Specifically, in Pakistan, the military wields significant influence over the nuclear program. This lack of robust civilian oversight raises concerns about transparency, accountability, and the potential for military miscalculations. Pakistan appears to fall behind when it comes to easing the divide between the public and the military; this provides India with ample time to increase its capabilities, nuclear arsenal, international position and foreign ties—further enlarging asymmetry as Pakistan is far too busy in domestic disturbances and economic frustrations to match its neighbor's pace¹⁰.

The Issue of Non-State Actors

Non-state actors pose a significant challenge to the precarious nuclear balance between Pakistan and India. Through a neo-classical realist lens, their presence amplifies the security dilemma, weakens deterrence strategies, and disrupts the regional power dynamic. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-pronged approach that goes beyond traditional state-centric security measures.

Pakistan has been accused of supporting some militant groups in Kashmir, however, these groups

⁸ Nasim, Jaweriya, Khushboo Fatima, and Sajida Noreen. 2020. "Strategic Balance between India and Pakistan with Respect to 'Balance of Power Theory.'" *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*. Scholar Publishing.

⁹ Chowdhury, Suban Kumar; Islam, Shakirul. 2017. "Does terrorism matter in South Asian peace process? A perspective of India-Pakistan". *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 3(2), 19-41

¹⁰ "Pakistan's Existential Economic Crisis." 2023. United States Institute of Peace. April 6. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/pakistans-existential-economic-crisis>.

often have their own agendas beyond acting as mere proxies. However, several events have undoubtedly contributed to the security dilemma between the two nuclear powers.

The 2008 Mumbai attacks by Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant group with links to Pakistan, resulted in devastating casualties and heightened tensions¹¹. This attack highlighted the dangers of cross-border terrorism and raised concerns about Pakistan's control over militant groups within its borders. Similarly, the 2001 Parliament attack and the 2016 Uri attack, both linked to militant groups with Pakistani connections, showcased the potential for escalation triggered by such violence. These attacks fuel suspicion and mistrust between India and Pakistan. India accuses Pakistan of harboring these groups, while Pakistan denies direct involvement and blames the violence on the ongoing Kashmir dispute. Each attack also raises the risk of escalation between the two nuclear-armed states. India's response to such attacks can provoke retaliation from Pakistan, potentially leading to a dangerous cycle of violence.

India has also been accused of providing covert support to some Kashmiri separatist groups. Pakistan views this as interference and a threat, heightening anxieties. Additionally, India's significant military modernization program, including nuclear weapons development, is perceived by Pakistan as a potential threat. This fuels Pakistan's own military buildup, creating a dangerous arms race that contributes to the security dilemma.

These events, along with the unresolved Kashmir dispute, contribute to Pakistan's security concerns in several ways. The constant threat of violence necessitates a high state of military preparedness, straining resources. The perceived threat from India justifies increased military spending, which can come at the expense of social welfare programs and economic development. These events can also stoke nationalist sentiment within Pakistan, making it more difficult for leaders to pursue peace talks with India. These non-state actors exacerbate the existing cycle of distrust between the two nations, making it difficult to break free from the security dilemma.

¹¹ Ashraf, Fehmida, 2009. *India Pakistan Relations-Post Mumbai Attacks*, Institute of Strategic Studies.

Recent Escalations

India's competence in its ability to safeguard and control its nuclear arsenal has been questioned innumerable times. In May 2021, India witnessed two concerning incidents involving uranium seizures. The Maharashtra Anti-Terror Squad apprehended two men in Mumbai with over 7 kilograms of natural uranium, raising alarms about potential black-market dealings and the possibility of leaks from within India's own nuclear security system. This highlighted vulnerabilities in India's nuclear material control¹². Further complicating matters, a second seizure of a substance claimed to be uranium occurred in Jharkhand just a month later. However, conflicting reports from Indian authorities cast doubt on the material's authenticity. This incident raised concerns about transparency in India's handling of nuclear security issues.

These internal events underscored the importance of robust nuclear security protocols in India. International organizations like the IAEA urged India to conduct thorough investigations and implement stricter measures to prevent future thefts of nuclear materials.

Highlighting a potential imbalance in regional security with Pakistan and the growing asymmetry between them, India, in March 2024, successfully conducted the first test flight of a domestically developed missile capable of carrying multiple nuclear warheads. This missile, named Agni-V and part of India's Agni series, strengthens India's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the test as a source of national pride and a testament to India's growing military prowess. This development comes amidst ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan, both nuclear-armed

¹² KHAN, AHYOUSHA. 2021. *Incidents of Uranium Theft in India: Depleting Nuclear Safety and International Silence*. June 12. Accessed April 23, 2024. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/06/12/incidents-of-uranium-theft-in-india-depleting-nuclear-safety-and-international-silence/>.

nations, and raises concerns about a potential arms race in South Asia¹³.

Conclusion

Further research could explore the potential for incorporating insights from other international relations theories, such as constructivism, which emphasizes the role of shared norms and ideas in shaping state behavior. Additionally, investigating the domestic political dynamics within Pakistan and India, including the influence of hardliners and the role of public opinion on nuclear policy, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making processes behind their nuclear postures.

The consequences of a potential nuclear war between Pakistan and India are unthinkable. The immediate human cost would be catastrophic, with millions of lives lost in the initial explosions and the long-term effects of radiation poisoning. Additionally, a nuclear conflict in South Asia could have global repercussions, triggering a nuclear winter with devastating consequences for climate and agriculture, potentially leading to mass famines across the globe. The very fabric of international security would be shattered, evoking fear and distrust for generations to come.

India-Pakistan relationship presents a complex web of challenges. The asymmetry in military capabilities, coupled with internal, political and social issues within both countries, creates a volatile environment, signaling security dilemma. This volatility is further amplified by the presence and testing of nuclear weapons. To prevent a catastrophic outcome, both nations need to prioritize open communication, confidence-building measures, disarmament, and a commitment to peaceful conflict resolution to ensure each other, continued longevity and security for generations to c

¹³ Times of India. 2024. India tests Agni-5 missile with MIRV tech, sends message to Pakistan & China. March 12.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-tests-agni-5-missile-with-mirv-tech-sends-message-to-pakistan-china/articleshow/108399971.cms>.

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