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China's Security Concerns in Taliban-Led Afghanistan, 2021–2023

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021 reignited the regional security landscape and necessitated China's redefinition of its Afghanistan policy. This study analyzes key security concerns driving China's policy towards the Taliban-led Afghanistan in 2021-2023 and explores the linkage between security, regional stability and geopolitical and geo-economic interests. This research uses qualitative research method and thematic analysis of the official Chinese statements, United Nations reports, academic papers and policy studies quoted in this document. A total of six themes were identified, which are interlinked and include concern over the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), the threat of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), border and Wakhan Corridor security, regional counterterrorism cooperation, protection of Chinese citizens, investments, and connectivity projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the reliability of Taliban counterterrorism commitments. The results show that the Chinese government had been influenced by the policy of diplomacy rather than military intervention as well as intelligence, security cooperation, multilateral cooperation and economic measures. The study posits that security is the major factor influencing China's engagement with Afghanistan, while economic connectivity and investment opportunities are still vital factors, yet are dependent on a more secure regional and Afghan environment.

Keywords: China, Afghanistan, Taliban, Regional Security Complex Theory, ETIM/TIP, ISKP, Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Security.

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Introduction

China and Afghanistan share a short border along the Wakhan Corridor between the Pamir Mountains and the Hindu Kush. The region is not particularly large but the strategic importance of Afghanistan in Beijing's calculations in the region is due to its geopolitical location, and its position between

Central Asia and South Asia and China's Xinjiang region. Afghanistan is also being talked about in the context of broader trade and connectivity linkages to China-Pakistan-Iran-Central Asia-West Asia. Security and longer-term interests in diplomacy and geo-economic matters are therefore at play in China's investment in Afghanistan (Huasheng,



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2016; Li, 2022).

The security aspect is particularly significant due to the fact that the instability in Afghanistan may impact the neighbouring areas and render China's domestic and regional goals more difficult to achieve. Beijing long has been worried about the possibility of the militants basing themselves in Afghanistan linking up with those seen as proponents of separatist and violent groups in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, insecurity in Afghanistan is likely to have a negative effect on regional transport, investment and connectivity plans, and pose risks to Chinese nationals and businesses. The issues gained more urgency following the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces and the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul in August 2021.

China was not the one who ended its engagement upon the advent of Taliban. It upheld and continued to stress stability and counterterrorism, sovereignty, and economic cooperation with the new regime, and the use of diplomatic channels. This role was seen as a sign of China's generally more active policy in being directly involved with political issues and regional coordination in Afghanistan, and not directly responsible for its domestic security. However, the engagement has been circumspect as Beijing remains uncertain whether the Taliban can stop Afghan soil from being utilized by militant organizations that Beijing views as its threat.

The central research question for the study is: What are the security concerns that affected China's policy towards the Taliban-led Afghanistan from 2021 to 2023, and how did they impact Beijing's political, regional and economic engagement with Afghanistan?

The study aims to have three objectives. First, it points out the primary security concerns that are also likely to be a feature of China's Afghanistan post-2021. Second, it examines how China's internal security issues like those of Xinjiang relate to the issues of nearby countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, central Asia, and transnational militant groups. Third, it analyses the impact of security on China's economic and connectivity interests, such as Chinese citizens, Investments, BRI related projects and potential connection with CPEC.

The study is an addition to the existing literature by addressing these dimensions in one post-2021 analysis. In this paper, the authors do not consider

counterterrorism, border security, diplomacy and connectivity as policy silos but rather as an interconnected security framework. The China-Taliban interaction can thus be seen as conditioned interaction: Beijing is prepared to keep up its political and economic interaction with the Taliban, but the intensity of this interaction can vary significantly depending on the ability of the Taliban to maintain the control of the militant threat and of providing a security environment adequate for the maintenance of such political and economic ties.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

Previous scholarship provides background to the reading of pre-taliban Afghanistan, and why it is becoming an ever more important part of Chinese regional policy. Huasheng's new paper on China's pivot towards Afghanistan reveals Beijing is not solely a One-China nation. China's increasing interest resulted from issues of security, diplomatic relations, economic opportunities, and regional connectivity. The instability of Afghanistan was not merely a foreign-policy issue but also an issue for security in the west border China, especially for Xinjiang (Huasheng, 2015; Huasheng, 2016).

In addition, scholars have viewed Afghanistan in the context of Beijing's global strategy, and its Afghan strategy has been linked to its strategy outside the sphere of Central and South Asian Countries (CSCA) as well. (Hong, 2013)

This literature also shows that China is interested in a dual regard. Afghanistan could be considered as a transit point for transport of energy, goods, and interconnectedness of Central Asian and South Asian region and rest of Eurasia and may be a risk of connectivity. This doesn't mean that China no longer has an interest in the region or its infrastructure or its resources when it comes to BRI interests, but it does not negate the threat of terrorism, separatists and political unrest in the region. The security risk management and geo-economic opportunity side-to-side frame-work has remained essential to understand the future post-war 2021.

That's significant given Huasheng's previous study that showed the Chinese government has been playing a more active but slower diplomatic game that is not starting to play out in 2021. It was not

preferred to take any military action as a means of action and the alternative was dialogue, economic engagement, regional cooperation and multi-lateral mechanisms. However, pre-2021 research is not sufficiently explanatory of the meaning of the withdrawal of the U.S. forces and the Taliban's return to power. They do not provide much clarity about how the connectivity project could move beyond vision and become reality in a Taliban governed state, nor whether it would turn out to be a viable option.

After 2021, scholarship dwells with greater emphasis on Taliban takeover security issues. However, Murtazashvili (2022) mentioned that not all of Chinese policy is economic-oriented. Border stability and security concerns in Xinjiang are central to Beijing's engagement, since it is concerned about moves by militant groups in Afghanistan like ETIM. This leaves a cautious trail because the investments and connections aspects of the package have been reduced by China, while the latter also has demanded assurances from the Taliban against counterterrorism.

Similarly, Mehra and Wentworth (2021) point out Afghanistan's ability to provide refuge to the militants. The key concern for Chinese worries about ETIM are the potential of security threats originating from Afghanistan across the border. That is why it is important; it indicates the potential for linking the domestic security concern and reconstruction and development of Afghanistan in the context of China. Beijing's insistence that the Taliban prevent the Afghan territory from being used against it is therefore important preconditions to bilateral contacts.

To expand the perspective on the security landscape, Kapur (2022) focuses instead on the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). But other challenges also arose due to the anti-China sentiment in ISKP and the integration of themes focusing on Xinjiang, as well as the possible involvement with other militant organisations, which followed the departure of foreign forces from ISKP. But that ISKP remains makes the point that in no way does the control of state ensure the elimination of transnational militant threats.

China's policy towards Afghanistan after the United States' departure was analyzed by Li (2022), who hypothesized that a new vigor of activity in Afghanistan surfaced by then, but this was not

enough to allow China to overcome political and security constraints for the scope of its involvement in Afghanistan. They point out that that analysis is significant because it paints a picture of Beijing wanting – wanting – influence and stability, but wanting neither to replace the United States as the security provider of choice, nor to replace NATO altogether. This reflects China's pragmatic approach to Security by a measure of limited and conditional scope rather than open-ended security post 2021.

Since the exit of the U.S., there has been a dramatic turnaround in China-Afghanistan relations. In Rasooli's et al (2023) discussion, the discussion around this relationship and their focus on security as a focal point of the relationship are discussed. They also outline potential connections between the violent groups operating within Afghanistan and those affiliated to Xinjiang, and the importance of economic integration and 'regional connectivity' for the region. Put another way, the literature is unanimous: Security is the key to Afghanistan's economic and diplomatic concerns.

However, there is a gap still. The literature largely exudes a fragmented approach to each of these aspects, rather than to the analysis of China's security policy since 2021 as a whole. The purpose of this study is to address this gap with an analysis of the interactions among those factors on the issue of domestic security, cross-border militancy, regional cooperation, border conflicts and investment protection over the last three years (2021-2023).

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory

This study is guided by Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as the theoretical foundation since it examines the phenomenon of focusing security issues within a region of geographically linked actors, and its close relation between actors' security. Theory in social science research serves as an analytical framework that allows a study to structure evidence and explain patterns beyond describing them (Waldt, 2020).

RSCT has relevance in Afghanistan due to the fact that the security environment cannot be interpreted without considering Afghanistan as part of a whole. The various elements related to the terrorism, the insecurity on the borders and the rule of the Taliban in Pakistan, Pakistan's security policies, Central Asian stability, Xinjiang worries of the Chinese and

connectivity of the region are interconnected. Transformations within Afghanistan can thus affect the threat assessments and policy decisions of those who live around and are in some way linked to Afghanistan. In this regard, China's engagement in Afghanistan is being influenced by its bilateral and broader regional security interests.

This interdependence is seen by the continued existence of transnational militant groups. TTP, ISKP, ETIM/TIP, al-Qaeda and others have impacts on more than just Afghanistan. They affect the security situation in Pakistan, Chinese worries over Xinjiang, stability in Central Asia, border management, and the security of the transport and investment corridor. The key to understanding Beijing's perspective on Afghan insecurity as a regional security issue is its position as a far-away domestic problem in another state (Tahir, 2022).

The theory also enables the study to be non-exclusive in its scope of engaging with non-state actors. States continue to be major actors due to their diplomatic, military, institutional and economic power; however, the Afghan case shows how the dynamics of regional security are also influenced by militant groups and non-state actors. They can affect border security, counterterrorism coordination, diplomacy and policy on engagement with the economy. In the Afghan case, the study illustrates the value of analysing the region from the perspective of the State but also highlights the importance of addressing non-state sources of insecurity.

This study uses three analytical relations to apply RSCT. Firstly, the instability in Afghanistan is linked with China's internal security issues in the region of Xinjiang. Second, Afghanistan's militant activities and political situation impact the bigger picture of security in the region, involving Pakistan and Central Asia. Thirdly, the security and stability of the region's connectivity and Chinese investments rely on the developments of the overlapping regions. The theory thus offers a model to understand the close relationship between China's security, diplomatic, and economic policies towards Afghanistan.

3. Methods

This research is designed as qualitative research of thematic analysis. The aim is not to count the occurrence of specific types of security events statistically, but to list recurring security issues and

policy concerns identified in sources that discuss China's interactions with the Taliban-led Afghanistan in 2021–2023.

The analysis is based on four types of sources included in the manuscript: official Chinese statements and diplomatic exchanges, U.N. reports on militant groups and the Afghan security situation, academic literature, and policy-focused studies. The official statements are established to show China's self-declared priorities and pledges that it has given the Taliban. Continuing activity and presence of the militant organisations are assessed using UN material. There is a wealth of academic and policy literature on China's regional security, diplomatic and economic interests.

The time frame is between 2021–2023, starting from the Taliban's regain in power in August 2021. Only where necessary for historical or institutional background to policies which persisted after the takeover, pre-2021 sources and events are used. The difference between them is crucial since the study focuses mostly on a transformation of the existing Chinese security approach in the context of an altered political landscape, rather than on the complete history of China-Afghan relations.

The material is organized according to the thematic analysis. The recurring themes identified in the source base are: (1) ETIM/TIP and Xinjiang-related security concerns; (2) ISKP and wider transnational militancy; (3) the Wakhan Corridor and border security; (4) regional counterterrorism and diplomatic cooperation; (5) protection of Chinese citizens, investments, and connectivity interests; and (6) Taliban counterterrorism commitments and the credibility of their implementation. Themes are then connected to RSCT to gauge the dynamics of interaction between domestic, bilateral and regional security concerns.

One of the limitations of the study is that it is dependent on public documents. The evidence can't fully capture the internal Chinese decision-making or confidential security cooperation, and public statements may only reflect the official policy from a certain angle. The study is thus not a detailed record of the internal calculations of Chinese policymakers, but only a study of the identifiable policy patterns and publicly known security issues.

4. Results

4.1 ETIM/TIP and Xinjiang Security

The analysis pinpoints ETIM/TIP as one of the most pressing security issues for Beijing in Afghanistan. These organisations are seen by China as separatist and extremist movements linked to Xinjiang and have always been a concern to China that Afghan land could be used for training, recruitment, ideology and logistics. Preventing such activity is thus closely linked to China's notion of territorial integrity and domestic security (Mehra & Wentworth, 2021).

This concern strongly influenced China's engagement with the Taliban around the time of the 2021 takeover. In July 2021, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a meeting in Tianjin urged Taliban officials to assure him that the Afghan land would not be used by organisations posing threats to China's security (Xinhua, 2021). This issue was then a core part of the diplomatic discussion between Beijing and the Taliban government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a).

The evidence, however, suggests that the Chinese military remains unsure about the Taliban's ability or willingness to stamp them out. In the manuscript, the movement of ETIM/TIP members from Badakhshan to other parts of the country was also reported as well as their continued stay in Afghanistan and their connection with other militant groups (United Nations Security Council, 2022). These developments serve as part of why Washington is still not convinced that Beijing has not addressed Beijing's security concerns with the Taliban's assurances. The key issue for China is not just whether the Taliban officially condemns attacks against China, but whether the Afghan government can be effective at limiting the activities, cooperation and movements of militancy within the country.

4.2 ISKP and Wider Transnational Militancy

ISKP is the second significant security threat. ISKP has been a significant source of instability, and continues to oppose the Taliban, since their return to power. Its hostility and animosity toward China bring yet another layer to Beijing's threat assessment (Kapur, 2022).

The October 2021 assault on a mosque in Kunduz by an ethnic Uyghur militant who was believed to

be connected to ISKP drew attention to the possible link between militancy in Afghanistan and reports on Xinjiang (Soliev, 2021). The manuscript also references ISKP propaganda activities against Chinese policies and economic activity, as well as the promotion of hostility towards Chinese interests (Ma, 2022; Webber, 2022). This not only raises Chinese territorial anxiety but also worries Chinese people, diplomatic facilities, businesses and infrastructure outside China's borders in the region.

ISKP, al-Qaeda, the TTP and ETIM/TIP continue to operate in the country, indicating that the Taliban's political power does not stem the overall presence of militants in Pakistan (United Nations Security Council, 2022). The net effect has been a long-standing dilemma for Beijing: engagement with the Taliban is essential to ensure cooperation, but the presence of numerous armed groups has made it difficult to convince people that political interaction provides a dependable security guarantee.

4.3 Wakhan Corridor and Border Security

China's security concerns are not limited to individual militant organisations. Border security is important, especially as it relates to the Wakhan Corridor, the land link between China and Afghanistan. Despite its remote location, Beijing is still worried by any security threats in Afghanistan could impact the security situation in China's western regions, especially Xinjiang (Huasheng, 2016; Tahir, 2022).

Border management is therefore part of a wider regional security strategy rather than a purely territorial issue. The importance of the Wakhan Corridor from an RSCT standpoint is the interconnection of Afghanistan's internal security concerns with broader regional and domestic security issues in China (Tahir, 2022).

4.4 Regional Counterterrorism and Diplomatic Cooperation

The results also indicate China prefers to take a more indirect approach in dealing with Afghan security issues. Facing the challenge of guarding China's borders, Beijing has not mustered Chinese troops in large numbers and has depended on diplomacy, intelligence and security cooperation, regional cooperation mechanisms and helping neighbours countries to handle their border security issues.

The following is an overview of the earlier efforts

that are relevant to this approach. China promoted Afghan-Pakistani-Tajikistani 'tripartite' security cooperation and was reported to have contributed to security capacity building in Afghanistan prior to 2021 (Toktomushev, 2018; Rasooli et al., 2023). They are significant because they demonstrate continuity in the Chinese approach to regional capacity-building and coordination over direct military intervention – and were undertaken before 2021.

China has continued to stress on sovereignty and non-interference, in addition to counterterrorism, since the return of the Taliban. In 2022, Chinese diplomacy towards Afghanistan reiterated the principles of respecting Afghan independence and sovereignty and opposing interference, and at the same time, proposed to cooperate in fighting terrorism and maintaining peace and security in Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b). The mix suggests a desire for Chinese involvement in security results but not in internal governance and military security in Afghanistan.

4.5 Protection of Chinese Citizens, Investments, and Connectivity Interests

Another key aspect of China's post-2021 security agenda concerns the protection of Chinese citizens and economic interests. The potential for Chinese investments and infrastructure programs is high-risk in the absence of transnational militancy and political instability. This work covers projects and commercial activities mentioned in the manuscript, such as Mes Aynak, Amu Darya oil basin, and the potential projects on connectivity through the BRI and CPEC.

So there is a conditional track between the economy and security, not a parallel track. Instability increases the risks to employees, transport, infrastructure and investments. Those risks could hold off or diminish Chinese economic engagement, an engagement that makes security guarantees and regional cooperation all the more vital. Beijing is concerned about a potential increase in exposure to violent threats as a result of the commercialization of neighbourhood, given violence targeted at Chinese nationals in neighbouring countries, such as in Pakistan (Delaney, 2022).

China's actions indicate that it sees the economy as a means to its end and not as an option to security

policy. Rather, the protection of investments, counterterrorism, border management and connectivity are all closely linked. Improvement of the Afghan situation will increase the opportunities for regional economic integration, but the degree and speed of the opportunities available will be reduced by insecurity.

4.6 Taliban Commitments and the Issue of Credibility

The issue of the gap in the commitment of Taliban assurances and Beijing's confidence is a recurring one. The Taliban have signed up that Afghanistan will not be used by such groups endangering China (Xinhua, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a). But UN reports on the continued presence of Uyghur militants and their links with other militant groups raises questions on the veracity and implementation of those commitments (United Nations Security Council, 2022).

This uncertainty is the policy of engagement but with a lack of full strategic trust for China. Beijing has an interest in continuing ties with the Taliban, who control the Afghan state, but it also has an interest in restricting its exposure as long as these organisations remain active.

5. Discussion

The results support the argument that security is the organising principle of China's policy toward Taliban-led Afghanistan. But "security first" isn't enough when it comes to describing the policy. The more significant conclusion is that while there are apparently discrete policy issues—such as Xinjiang, militant groups, border issues, diplomacy, regional security cooperation, investment protection, and connectivity—they are all interconnected within a single framework of regional security interdependence.

This pattern can be understood with the help of RSCT. ETIM/TIP highlights the linkage between the internal security environment in Afghanistan and China's internal security issues. The relevance of a militant organisation in Afghanistan for Beijing is not because Afghanistan itself is a conventional military threat to China, but because of how far the chain of instability in Afghanistan and Xinjiang can reach. The line between domestic and regional security is thus not well-defined.

A similar pattern at a larger scale is created by

ISKP. It impacts on the Taliban administration, neighbouring countries, Chinese citizens and investments into the region. The threats to Chinese interests and anti-China propaganda due to security problems in Afghanistan prove that the security impact of instability in Afghanistan is not limited to the China–Afghanistan border. They can manifest themselves in attacks, through a network of states and ideological mobilisation.

The Wakhan Corridor is another example of how geographical proximity does not equate with the threat level. While the straight border is short and far away, China still fears Afghanistan as security ties are complex in a wider area. The security situation in Afghanistan has a nexus with Pakistani interests, as well as those of Central Asia, militant groups, transport corridors and political unrest despite the absence of direct cross-border mobility.

The findings also shed light on the reasons for China's adoption of indirect security management. A large-scale military intervention would run counter to Beijing's declaration on sovereignty and non-interference and would put China in a position where it has sought to avoid responsibilities. Beijing has tools to manipulate Afghan security such as diplomatic engagement, counterterrorism coordination, intelligence cooperation, regional mechanisms, and, selectively, economic incentives, without handing over the responsibility for any military engagement.

But such a strategy relies on imperfect security cooperation with the Taliban. The Taliban authorities are needed in Afghanistan to exercise political control over the country and are likely to have the capacity to limit the spread of militant activities, which is China's need. Meanwhile, Beijing is uncertain about the willingness of the Taliban to implement their side of the bargain, keeping the partnership from turning into a reciprocal “strategic trust.” This leaves the resulting policy as a conditional form of security engagement: China keeps diplomatic and economic relationships and is only prepared to participate further if the situation there improves and if there is a clear indication that there will be no threats coming from the Afghan territory to China's interests.

This reading of the relationship between security and geo-economics is also explained. There is a relevance of BRI, CPEC related connectivity,

Mining, Energy and Trade but they are not independent linchpins that can be able to solve insecurity. Rather, the findings of this study suggest that instability itself is likely to raise the risk for citizens and projects, more risk will make investment less attractive or feasible, and this will further make political stability and counterterrorism more salient issues in China. Security therefore conditions economic engagement rather than merely existing alongside it.

The study also highlights continuity and change in 2021. The Chinese tradition of avoiding large military interventions, relying on regional cooperation, and refraining from interfering in others' affairs is seen in a sense of continuity. There is change to be seen in the increased urgency brought about by the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops and the direct political rule of the Taliban. Beijing thus had a dilemma, as it had even more reason for engaging the Taliban and less other security actors to rely on.

The results thus confirm the value of the RSCT in understanding the Afghanistan policy of China. Afghanistan is not treated by Beijing as an isolated foreign-policy issue. Its importance is generated by its network of regional security relations with Xinjiang, Pakistan, Central Asia, transnational militant groups, and economic routes. The post-2021 period illustrates the impact of local political developments in Afghanistan on regional security considerations in this broader regional context.

6. Conclusion

This study studied the prevailing security concerns for the making of China's policy on Taliban-led Afghanistan, from 2021 till 2023. It concludes that Beijing's actions address several interrelated concerns: ETIM/TIP, the ongoing security challenge from ISKP and other militant groups from outside Afghanistan operating within Afghanistan, security of the Wakhan Corridor and China's western border, security cooperation in the region, and safeguarding its citizens, investments, and connectivity interests.

The key conclusion is that China's interaction with Afghanistan is to be understood as conditional security cooperation. Although Beijing has maintained diplomatic relations with the Taliban and has offered interest in cooperation along economic lines, they have not responsible for Afghanistan for military affairs. In China's case,

however, it is political engagement, security coordination, a regional network of mechanisms, and economic incentives that form the basis, with assurances that Afghan land won't be exploited for groups threatening China.

The study also reveals Taliban assurances have not allayed Chinese fears. Since then, the continued reporting on ETIM/TIP, ISKP, al-Qaeda, TTP and other militant groups has raised questions regarding the ability of the Taliban to enforce its commitment to counterterrorism. That's one of the reasons why China has stayed involved but on a cautious basis.

A helpful explanation for this behaviour is offered by the RSCT as it recognises that the main threats found in the study are transsectoral in nature, crossing both domestic and bilateral and regional stages. Afghanistan instability is a concern to China as it is linked to Xinjiang, Pakistan, Central Asia, militants, and regional connectivity. As a consequence, Afghanistan's security situation is not only a direct issue of the bilateral border, but also of the impacts on Chinese interests.

It also found that China's economic interests in

Afghanistan are underpinned by the security context in which its operations must be conducted. In the long term, possible opportunities include extending CPEC South, developing infrastructure and BRI connectivity, and engaging in mining activities. However, these opportunities also entail additional costs and risks associated with implementation. Security, therefore, is not a secondary issue to be considered after other factors; rather, it is a determining factor in shaping China's economic and strategic nexus in the region.

The study has a few limitations; one of these is that all the information is taken from official statements and the United Nations reports, academic work, policy documents, and books. These sources cannot fully show in confidence what was going on in China's decision-making processes, or how deep the Chinese security cooperation with the Taliban and neighbouring countries might be. Further studies conducted after 2023 could reveal if there is an increased level of Chinese economic engagement, a more robust counterterrorism relationship, or a continuation of superficially involved and cautious relations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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