

# India's and Russia's Approaches to the Indo-Pacific—Marrying the Two

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## **Abstract**

The paper discusses the prerequisites for the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region, or Indo-Pacific, as a conceptual term to denote a new vast geostrategic space that embraces closely connected countries facing similar challenges. To this end, the article analyzes geopolitical transformations that have brought about a change in the conceptualization of this macro-region and India's foreign policy strategy. The paper provides an overview of neorealist and constructivist approaches characteristic of Moscow and New Delhi, respectively. The paper argues that today Russia's involvement in the region is limited and by focusing on the Asia-Pacific Russia overlooks the

vistas of closer relations with India. Russia could gain more if it changes its perception of the Indo-Pacific as an American concept and takes a different, constructivist approach. By ignoring new realities Russia deprives itself of additional opportunities in Asia, which is especially important in view of its general turn to the East and amid unceasing confrontation with the West.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, India, Russia, Chinese factor, foreign policy concepts.

One of the key changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was the rise of Asian countries and, accordingly, the emergence of new centers of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Such changes did not remain unnoticed—the major powers began to build up their presence there; Russia, in particular, began to carry out an “eastward turn.” However, in the new realities, not only the traditional great powers, but also the Asian giants grew more confident in defending their positions in the world. One of the recent examples of such a course can be seen in India’s attempts to promote the foreign policy concept of the Indo-Pacific region (IPR) on the world scene. New Delhi argues that this new term reflects the changing balance of power in the region and brings together two highly important regions into one, thereby increasing the space for economic and security cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2013). India maintains that the expansion of the Asia-Pacific region (APR) to the Indian Ocean zone is in the interests of all countries by virtue of its inclusiveness and openness to all of the region’s actors, who are keen to improve interaction with each other (Ganapathi, 2019). From India’s point of view, the Indo-Pacific region is a geographical space comprising territories and countries located in the areas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which covers, respectively, South, Southeast, East, and Northeast Asia, as well as the Middle East, the extremities of the Arabian Peninsula (the Middle East), and Africa’s East Coast (Jaishankar, 2020). In fact, the new macro-region merely expands the boundaries of the Asia-Pacific Region, which is a combination of three sub-regions—Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific,

but this is highly significant from the geopolitical point of view, as it reflects the strengthening of India and the growing importance of shipping routes.

Although India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried to clarify his country's interpretation of the IPR (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020), there are many different ideas about the geography of the IPR and the respective foreign policy strategies (U.S., Japan, Australia, etc.). Moreover, some do not share optimism about the emergence of this new definition of a regional space. In particular, Russia (The Russian Foreign Ministry, 2020a) and China (Xiaoyong, 2020—the response of a Chinese diplomat to a policy article by U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper in the same newspaper *The Straits Times*) at the official level have expressed disagreement with the reformatting of the APR. They argue that such a move is detrimental to the interests of the region's countries and plays into the hands of the United States. Since the concept of the Indo-Pacific region is really important for India's foreign policy and for the entire Asian region as a whole, and Moscow is interested in developing the most productive relations with New Delhi and getting a firmer foothold in Asia, the correlation of India's and Russia's approaches to the IPR becomes extremely crucial.

At this stage, the Indo-Pacific, or the IPR, cannot be considered as a geopolitical reality, since the integration of the two oceans' spaces remains largely a desirable goal, and not a reality yet (Jaishankar, 2020). For this reason, the author found it appropriate to consider India's understanding of the IPR from constructivist positions, which allow for explaining the emergence of certain "constructs" and analyzing the role of ideas in international relations. India's interpretation of this concept is fundamentally different from that of other countries, while the contextual perception is very important in analyzing concepts, especially those in Asia. The Russian discourse contradicts this approach, for it focuses on the balance of power, the structure, and the national interests of states and regards any ideological constructs as their derivatives. In other words, Russia's foreign policy strategies and expectations rest upon a neorealist basis, and therefore the interpretation of India's policy is different from New Delhi's. Why is

Russia reluctant to accept the new geopolitical construct? What can change the Russian Foreign Ministry's opinion on this issue? And what can Russia achieve as a result? The *hypothesis* of this article is that at the current stage, the Russian foreign policy discourse is based on the neorealist paradigm and perceives the term 'Indo-Pacific' as a U.S.-promoted concept that is directed against China, and therefore refuses to accept it as running counter to the national interests of Russia and its strategic partners. At the same time, a look at the IPR concept from the standpoint of constructivism would make it possible to achieve great results in implementing the "eastward turn" because it would reflect not only the ideas of changing regional realities, but also the aspirations of different countries (especially India), which have their own understanding of this concept. This, in turn, would contribute to both achieving better mutual understanding with New Delhi and to strengthening Russia's positions in Asia. The purpose of the article, therefore, is to show the reader how a look at the IPR concept from a different angle might neutralize Russia's prejudices regarding India's geopolitical strategy and benefit both Moscow and New Delhi.

### **INDIA'S VERSION OF INDO-PACIFIC**

The Indo-Pacific region as an integral space emerged a long time ago. Historically, shipping sea routes played a great role as a means of transporting goods, maintaining communication between peoples and disseminating knowledge. However, India, just like China, at some point abandoned the development of its fleet, while building up its potential as a continental power. Thus, the Mughal Empire (1526-1858) relied mostly on the strength of its ground forces, while the protection of maritime spaces was confined mostly to strengthening ports on land and delegating the shipping function to merchant companies, rather than developing the country's fleet (Gommans, 2002, pp. 163-164). The Marathi (1674-1820), however, had a fairly strong fleet until the middle of the 18th century, yet Western colonization significantly weakened and reduced the scale of India's shipbuilding (Kantak, 1993, pp. 20-21; Po, 2018, pp. 80, 207). China, on the other hand, lost interest in navigation in the 15th-16th centuries during the Ming dynasty.

Chinese shipping first reached its apogee, but then fell under certain restrictions imposed by the leadership, while the role of the Navy became purely defensive (Lo, 1958). In other words, China stopped sending long-distance maritime expeditions, though continued to build ships to protect the coast. The Qing dynasty, whose rule lasted during the 17th-19th centuries, also attached much more importance to safety on land than at sea. As a result, the Chinese fleet gradually fell into neglect (Zurndorfer, 2016, p. 84). These days both countries are developing their naval potentials, as well as merchant shipping, which, among other things, is one of the stumbling blocks between the two Asian giants (in particular, this concerns New Delhi's suspicion towards China's rumored String of Pearls strategy—a plan for surrounding India).

Today, as the center of economic and political activity is drifting towards Asia, and in view of the growing need for energy supplies, all of the region's littoral countries, one way or another, strive to strengthen their maritime potential. New Delhi has proclaimed the status of a maritime power as one of its foreign policy goals (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011). It is noteworthy that India, which has practically no foreign policy concepts/strategy (as a rule, the Indian leadership formulates it verbally), has adopted the Maritime Security Strategy, one of the few official documents. India believes it is an imperative to strengthen maritime security, which should “not only serve to secure India's interests in the maritime domain but also act as a hedge against any adventurism on the land frontiers” (Singh, 2016). The Indian government believes that one of the main foreign policy tasks on this track is to strengthen cooperation with the United States (Rajagopalan, p. 84), which supports India's aspirations in a region that until recently was called the Asia-Pacific, and is now referred to as the Indo-Pacific. Growing naval cooperation with the United States in combination with the Americans' decision to abandon the previously used term APR in favor of the IPR and the active promotion of the latter on the international scene makes other countries suspicious that the new term is nothing but an attempt by the Americans to dictate their own vision of regional development. And not without reason: in

2019, the Trump administration published a document titled Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. That being said, one should not forget that New Delhi's and Washington's ideological components of the same "construct" are different: India stands for cooperation among all, while the Americans are for an alliance of all against China. Of course, India finds the Chinese factor worrisome, but the new concept is intended to strengthen its positions and counterbalance Beijing's influence, rather than create an alliance against it.

India seeks to gain international recognition as a "great power." It is strongly against being isolated in its region, South Asia, and being kept on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Region concept (Khurana 2017, p. 3). Being number one country in terms of population, the world's third economy in terms of purchasing power parity and one of the leading states from the standpoint of military and political potential, it reasonably lays claim to a greater status at both global and regional levels. Senior officials argue that the merger of the Indian and Pacific regions into one not only objectively reflects the new geopolitical structure in Asia but is also justified geographically and historically. For example, India's foreign minister has called the Indo-Pacific a historical concept that has obtained a new meaning (Valdai Discussion Club, 2019). It is noteworthy that New Delhi is extremely interested in harmonizing the aspirations of the region's countries and in forming a new security architecture in Asia, where shipping routes are becoming increasingly important. The term IPR was coined by the Indian Navy's Captain Gurpreet Khurana in 2007 (Kupriyanov, 2019). We should add that, in contrast to South Asia, East and Southeast Asia have long been on the periphery of India's foreign policy. Interest in these regions arose towards the end of the 20th century, when East Asia's development boom opened up promising prospects. In fact it heralded India's "eastward turn," which would eventually be called Look East (Rajendram, 2014, p. 3). In 2014, it was replaced by the Act East concept, which, India hopes, will let it achieve two main goals—increase the level of security along its borders and strengthen economic ties with the Asia-Pacific countries, but the real reason for the advancement of Indian positions is the strengthening of China

and its growing presence in the region (Rajendram, 2014, p. 5). At the same time, India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in his book *India's New Asia-Pacific Strategy: Modi Acts East* argues that the Indo-Pacific "for India, it is the logical next step beyond Act East and a transcending of the confines of South Asia" (Jaishankar, 2020). Meanwhile, many find the quintessence of India's understanding of the new concept in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Asia security summit Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, in which he noted that growing trade and demand for energy and joint efforts to strengthen security were quite convincing arguments in favor of a new "construct" implying greater "freedom, openness and inclusiveness," while retaining ASEAN as a center (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). It is this speech that all of India's representatives rely on and refer to in their statements on this subject.

### **RUSSIA'S APPROACH, OR THE IPR IN THE NEOREALIST PARADIGM**

Russia's position is different. Firstly, Russian foreign policy continues to rank the Western track as one of the highest priorities, and therefore the global agenda is being formatted within the framework of Russian-American relations (Chekov, et al., 2019; Trenin, 2019). For this reason, the IPR is regarded as a pro-American concept, directed against China, which runs counter to the interests of our country (The Russian Foreign Ministry, 2020c). Secondly, in Asia, Moscow stands by Beijing's side, which refuses to support the new regional initiative. The Chinese leadership is skeptical about the Indo-Pacific, for it sees it as evidence that the real aim of the main actors in the region (in particular, the so-called Quad—the format of quadrilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia in the security sphere; it was first proposed by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in early 2007) is to form a kind of military alliance to encircle China (Jiangtao and Zhou, 2017). Such a position becomes justified, if one bears in mind Washington's strategy that unequivocally described China as a "revisionist power," which uses coercion as a tool to enforce its national interests and violates the norms of international law (Department of Defense, 2019, pp. 7-10). At the same time, the Russian Foreign

Ministry directly points out that it considers the IPR “an attempt... to reconfigure the existing structures of the Asia-Pacific region and move from ASEAN-centered consensus-seeking forms of interaction to something that would be divisive... Indo-Pacific Strategies should not be discussed in a way which would imply that somebody should be contained by this cooperation” (The Russian Foreign Ministry, 2020c). In this context, the Russian and Chinese points of view coincide: any support for the Indo-Pacific “construct” for them is tantamount to recognizing the U.S. way of governing the regional affairs, and therefore unacceptable for either side. One should not forget that Moscow and Beijing have their own projects—Greater Eurasia and One Belt, One Road, respectively, which arouse questions about the need for alternative options and/or pairing initiatives with each other.

The Russian expert community is divided into those who agree with the Kremlin's official stance that behind this construct there is nothing but U.S. interests and the desire of U.S. allies to contain China's influence (Sumskii, 2017; Kanaev and Korolev, 2019), and those who argue that Russia should take its place in the Indo-Pacific region as soon as possible, formulate its own interpretation of the Indo-Pacific and complement India's vision, which is more or less close to us, in accordance with its national interests (Kupriyanov, 2018; Zolotukhin, 2019). The author belongs to the latter group, which sees a chance of taking more active steps on the Asian track of the Russian foreign policy strategy, called the “Eastward Turn.” For the time being that strategy depends heavily on progress in the dialogue between Russia and the West and remains rather passive. The development of the Far East and its links with Asia might become a platform for cooperation with India as a logical continuation of New Delhi's Act East strategy (Baru, 2019). Back in 2017, New Delhi openly expressed interest in developing economic ties with the Far East and began to take an active part in the Eastern Economic Forum (The Hindu Business Line, 2017). However, it should be borne in mind that Russian-Indian relations, although they began to develop along an ascending line since the late 1990s, still predominantly follow the trajectory set by the Soviet period. Moreover, the Soviet Union's demise and prolonged disregard for Asian

affairs produced a situation in which the new generations of Indians are almost entirely oriented towards the United States, while Russia is increasingly perceived as a minor power. Respectively, the Russian elite is of the same opinion of India (Lunev and Shavlay, 2018, pp. 716-717). Trading and economic interaction leaves much to be desired—the trade turnover of the two countries in 2019 amounted to just over \$11 billion (Russian Foreign Trade, 2020), due to both objective reasons (for example, logistics) and subjective ones (lack of business interest). On the other hand, both countries maintain a high level of political cooperation on global and regional issues, both in bilateral and multilateral formats (RIC, BRICS, SCO). But positive rhetoric and common views should be backed up by real action: Moscow should assist its natural ally New Delhi in its striving to occupy a worthy niche in the region and in the world and to promote the concept of the Indo-Pacific region, which meets the interests of both states.

The Russian Foreign Ministry is extremely skeptical about the adoption of an Indo-Pacific concept, because, in fact, it analyzes the new “construct” through the lens of the neorealist paradigm. It seems that today’s reasoning on this issue is as follows.

1) *The system of international relations* is anarchic in nature, with the net effect of one of the key conflicts being resistance to the attempts by the only superpower to impose a unipolar world order and establish its own rules of the game (Waltz, 2000, pp. 29-30). In this case, we are witnesses to a confrontation between the advocates of multipolarity, Russia and China, on the one hand, and the hegemonism of the United States at all levels (The Russian Foreign Ministry, 2020a): Moscow and Beijing reject the IPR concept simply because Washington is strongly in its favor.

2) Since the United States is the leading world power, there are more chances the region’s new architecture will be built according to U.S. templates. In this case, the regional *balance of power* will shift towards an informal union of the so-called “maritime democracies” (the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India) led by the White House (Shearer, 2017). At the same time, the main stake is on India: with the aim of emphasizing the importance of New Delhi in Washington’s calculations and thereby

“pulling” it into its orbit, the Americans are actively promoting a new concept of the Indo-Pacific region (Kliman, et al., 2019, p. 3). The Russian Foreign Ministry responds that the “Indian friends are fully aware” of this pitfall and will avoid getting into it (The Russian Foreign Ministry, 2020a).

3) Despite official pronouncements that the new format does not exclude the possibility of China's participation in it (The White House, 2020), in reality, the U.S. establishment is pursuing the aim of containing it (The White House, 2021; Henry, 2019). American analysts do not hide the fact that such an informal alliance is intended not only and not so much to strengthen cooperation between states sharing the common values of freedom and democracy as to *enhance security coordination and interaction to counterbalance China's growing capabilities and ambitions* and to form a coalition of countries capable of presenting a common front in the event of a full-scale conflict with China (Grossman, 2020). This configuration contradicts Russia's *national interests* and the aspirations of other regional actors which do not seek confrontation with Beijing, however fearsome they might find China's growing influence (The Russian Foreign Ministry, 2019).

### **INDIA'S IDEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR A NEW DIMENSION OF RUSSIA'S APPROACH**

However, the neorealist paradigm does not take into account the special features of regional identity, which is important for shaping the subsystem of international relations in Asia. Unlike the supporters of neorealism, one of the founders of constructivism as a political theory, Alexander Wendt, proceeds from the postulate that all fundamental phenomena within the international system (national sovereignty, the anarchic nature of international relations, national interests, etc.) are constructs determined by the characteristics of the subject of analysis proper, as well as its contextual environment (Wendt, 1992). Therefore, the objectivity of these concepts can be called into question, and the very fact of their objectification by means of reaching a consensus on their account in the research environment does not imply full compliance with reality—and this is the key contradiction between

this approach and neorealism. This difference enables the researcher to be more sensitive towards the context in which the phenomena exist, and to the differences in their phenomenology, as well as to form an understanding of the absence of a single common coordinate system within which cognition takes place (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001, p. 393). One of the greatest authorities in the field of regionalism in international relations, Amitav Acharya, argues that territorial proximity and functional interaction of states are not enough for constructing a region—there must be an idea that would unite them all (Acharya, 2000, p. 163). The IPR can be considered precisely as such a connecting idea, and its interpretation should be decisive in accordance with the concepts of constructivists (Adler, 1997, p. 322). If these concepts are added to the neorealist postulates, the picture will be the opposite:

1) First of all, the non-American versions of the Indo-Pacific provide for strengthening the polycentric world order—the version of the *system* that Moscow, New Delhi, and Beijing stand for (Lunev, 2012, pp. 122, 130). As Mirski and Tellis write in *Crux of Asia*, “if the history of previous rising powers is any indication, as China and India will continue to grow they will want to progressively reshape the international system to advance their own interests—interests that may differ from those of the United States, the established hegemon that sustains the current global order” (Tellis and Mirski, 2013, p. 5). The task of the tripartite RIC format (Russia-India-China), however, should be not only to support each other on global issues, but also to promote a common vision of the regional order, which is yet to be formulated through joint discussions. Given the three countries’ close or identical views on world political issues (which, for example, can be seen in comparing the way they vote in the UN, in their joint statements and actions within the RIC, BRICS and the SCO, and in the developing strategic partnership among them), as well as the proximity of positions taken by other regional players in the IPR, the new concept may well become an effective mechanism for jointly solving the problems that face Asian countries and enhancing the trend towards regionalization, which contributes to deeper cooperation on a wider range of issues.

2) India's position provides for including states in a new geopolitical construct that reflects the existing *balance of power*, and not excluding them from it. Mainly, this applies to the changed status of India itself, which from the standpoint of a combination of key parameters may well claim the status of a great power and, accordingly, a greater role at the regional and global levels. The issue of recognition is extremely acute—both a superpower and great powers are to regard themselves and be recognized as such by the world community and each other; otherwise, they will be unable to fully correspond to their status. The example of India is most eloquent (Buzan, 2003, pp. 36-37). It is the main actors of the international system, both existing and emerging, that lock horns for influence. In fact, the Asia-Pacific region (APR) treated India as an outsider (it is noteworthy that the country is still not a member of APEC), and its presence in the region was rather limited. On the other hand, replacing the geopolitical construct with a broader one does not mean a shift of attention from Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean space. The ultimate aim is to expand and complement the latter. Moreover, the positioning of ASEAN as the center of a larger-scale regional architecture is an attempt to protect from erosion the positions being held by this group and also the key positions of those Southeast Asian countries whose influence extends beyond the APR.

3) The merger of the regions of the Indian and Pacific oceans, in general, meets the *national interests* of a larger number of states than the Asia-Pacific space. This is borne out by the fact that a wider construct, albeit with its own specific features, becomes part of the foreign policy strategies of an increasingly growing number of players, thus symbolizing their interest in implementing this idea. As for Russia, this project could complement the Russian idea of Greater Eurasia (in particular, through the convergence of overland and maritime infrastructure projects along the region's borders) and improve the Far East's development prospects. In the end, this, alongside other things, will help Russia slightly expand room for maneuver in relations with China, because the asymmetry in relations with it keeps growing (Gabuev, 2016). Still, the concerns of Chinese partners could be eased to a certain extent, if Moscow, New Delhi, and Beijing pooled efforts

to enhance the region's integrity and ensure the safety of shipping routes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Kupriyanov, 2018; Lunev and Shavlay, 2018, p. 726); given soaring energy consumption, this task is high on the Chinese agenda.

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The discourses of the Russian and Indian governments regarding the new geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific region prompt the conclusion that Moscow's and New Delhi's policies are different ontologically, which prevents their analysis within the same frame of reference. As a result, the Russian Foreign Ministry opts for a neorealist stance, which implies opposition to the hegemonic aspirations of the United States and, accordingly, its projects, while India adheres to a different vision of the Indo-Pacific and counts on Moscow's support and participation as a strategic partner... The two countries stick to different concepts, and therefore cannot reach a consensus that might help both of them to avoid missing the available opportunities.

India promotes the IPR as a natural continuation of its Act East policy, for it sees this initiative as an opportunity to gain a firmer foothold in Asia. At the same time, India seeks to assert its role in the region not to the detriment of other regional actors, but with due regard for their interests—through their involvement in shaping a joint regional construct, the latter's interpretation being still quite flexible. On this track, New Delhi will benefit from interaction with Russia and China, whose attitude to the IPR is moderately negative: both consider it a product of U.S. policy. It is the ideological basis of India's understanding of the Indo-Pacific that Russia's Foreign Ministry tends to underestimate, for it analyzes any international phenomena from the standpoint of neorealism, the national interests of the parties, and the balance of power being of decisive importance. The Russian Foreign Ministry is convinced that the new initiative is being promoted by Washington and therefore sees it as “persistent attempts of extra-regional powers to reshape the established order to serve their narrow interests” (The Russian Foreign Ministry, 2020b), while ignoring the fact that the term was proposed by the Indians themselves long before the Americans and that they

put a completely different complexion on this concept. In other words, Russia's policy is based on a different ontology than India's. The importance that the constructivists attach to the ideological component gives way to pragmatic calculations in the zero-sum game between Russia and the United States. However, if the neorealist postulates are looked at from a different point of view, it will be easy to identify a number of advantages that can be derived from developing a joint approach to the IPR. A dialogue with the Americans may be useful in this respect.

Exposing disagreements between the two states on one of the major Indian foreign policy issues and finding compromises will be crucial to improving mutual understanding and deepening bilateral cooperation. If achieved, the convergence of approaches will give Russia-India relations an additional impetus for development. In addition, Russia can use the IPR to strengthen its positions in the two oceans, which is especially important in the context of confrontation with the West and Russia's Eastward Turn strategy. On the other hand, ignoring the new realities may deprive our country of additional opportunities in Asia, where Russia's current presence is extremely insignificant.

Undoubtedly, one should neither underestimate nor overestimate the impact of conceptual changes, but it makes sense to emphasize Moscow's involvement in the transformations afoot in the region and its interest in having a say in reformatting the security architecture. The author believes that it is expedient for the Russian foreign policy-making agencies to revise the official stance regarding the Indo-Pacific region. It is advisable to formulate one's own understanding of this term and reconcile it with the vision of other IPR actors through discussions on regional cooperation, with special attention paid to India's interpretation as the most significant one. Perhaps, considering this issue within the RIC and developing a common vision of the Indo-Pacific region would help smooth over contradictions and build confidence not only in a trilateral format, but also between New Delhi and Beijing, which, given the geopolitical rivalry between them, is extremely important for Moscow, for which both India and China are key strategic partners.

Formulating one's own vision of the IPR will serve both the internal political interests of the state (development of the Far East) and foreign

policy ones (strengthening positions in Asia). The advancement of the new “construct” will contribute to coping with Russia’s ambitious task of accomplishing a real turn to the East and restoring its position in Asia as an influential world power, rather than remaining a peripheral player. Support for New Delhi’s approach will reaffirm Russia’s friendly disposition towards India and strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation. At the same time, the development of a joint RIC policy on this issue, based on common interests, will become a worthy complement, rather than an antagonistic alternative, to the Asia-Pacific concept and guarantee the emergence of a truly open and inclusive geopolitical space (in contrast to the U.S. idea). This will certainly strengthen the positions of the three countries in question and improve their interaction in Asia.

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