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An Implication of Geopolitics on Nepal's Foreign Policy and National Security

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Nepal's geopolitical position between India and China, using a descriptive and analytical approach, using secondary data to explore its complex landscape and its implications for foreign policy and national security. Historically, Nepal has served as a buffer state, shaping its foreign policy and security strategies. However, as global dynamics have changed, so Nepal's perception of its role has evolved. The traditional idea of a buffer state is now giving away to more a proactive approach, with Nepal aiming to be a "bridge" between its neighbours fostering connectivity and cooperation. The shift is clear in Nepal's transition from viewing its landlocked as a drawback to embracing the potential of being a "land link," a crucial pathway for regional trade and connectivity. The evolving geopolitical landscape in South Asia, marked by increased competition between the United States and China, presents challenges and opportunities for Nepal. Nepal can achieve economic growth, regional cooperation, and infrastructural development by adopting a balanced and inclusive approach and cultivating strong relationships with all stakeholders. In conclusion, reshaping and implementing a pragmatic foreign policy and national security strategy based on the changing context is the best approach. With wisdom and foresight, Nepal can develop leverage through its unique geographical location.

Keywords: Geopolitics, national interest, foreign policy, national security, national security strategy

Introduction

Nepal, a landlocked nation between India and China, has been referred to as a "yam between two boulders" for over two and a half centuries. As analyzed by Yadunath Khanal, Prithvi Narayan Shah depicts the country as a yam caught between two stones, illustrating its unique and challenging security issues (Khanal, 2000). Nepal's strategic position between these two powerful nations remains the dominant influence, shaping its interactions with the world and internal dynamics. Today, the "boulders" are no longer the fledgling empires of the 18th century, but economic juggernauts reshaping the global landscape. China, the world's second-largest economy, exerts significant influence on commerce, technology, and diplomacy, while India, the fifth-largest economy, is rapidly ascending as a major player in the global arena. Nepal, geographically positioned between these two powerful nations, finds itself in a delicate balancing act, navigating the complexities of its relations with both neighbors while safeguarding its own national interests and autonomy. This position demands careful diplomacy, shrewd decision-making, and a deep understanding of the ever-evolving geopolitical landscape.

Foreign policy is a crucial instrument for a nation to achieve national interest, often influenced by geography. Nepal's foreign policy is shaped by geopolitics, positioning the country as a focal point for major powers and embroiled in the geopolitical dynamics of both domestic and international affairs (Liang, 2022). Nepal, a landlocked, least developed, and highly vulnerable nation, faces many challenges in the 21st century. A clear definition of national security remains elusive, and there are gaps in existing strategic frameworks that further complicate understanding. Acharya (2020) suggests that integrating Nepal's foreign and national security policies is a crucial step forward. This integration fosters linkages between these two areas, enhancing synergies in their development and implementation. By connecting foreign policy objectives with domestic security needs, Nepal can develop a more effective approach to navigate its unique challenges and safeguard its national interests, crucial for navigating an increasingly complex global landscape.

A task force reorienting foreign policy has identified issues like a lack of a comprehensive document and insufficient integration between foreign and national security policies (HLTF, 2018). Despite diplomatic efforts, Nepal has not fully used its helpful location (Gupta, 2023). To address geopolitical complexity, Nepal must strive for consensus in foreign policy, proactive diplomacy, economic prosperity, political stability, active think tanks, and visionary leadership (K. C, 2023).

This study explores the relationship between Nepal's geopolitical landscape and its foreign policy and national security formulations. It aims to understand how geopolitical factors shape Nepal's approach to the international system and internal security considerations. Nepal's natural resources and strategic location offer significant opportunities, but they require conscious efforts to turn them into assets. The study aims to understand the conceptual framework of geopolitics, why Nepal evaluates foreign policy and national security simultaneously through a geopolitical lens, and how geopolitical factors significantly influence these decisions in the Nepali context. Geopolitics is considered an

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independent variable, while foreign policy and national security are examined as dependent variables.

Concept

Geopolitics is a unique approach to understanding global affairs, focusing on the profound influence of geography on politics and international relations (Flint, 2016). It examines how a place's inherent characteristics, such as resources, climate, and population, shape its power dynamics and foreign policy. Geopolitics is not just about maps and distances, but also the interconnectedness of political power and geographic space (Graham, 1998). It reveals that a country's location, access to water, and claim over certain land territories are dynamic factors shaping its history, diplomacy, and ambitions. The study often delves into historical patterns of resource control, border conflicts, and the strategic significance of certain geographical areas. Water is a crucial factor in international relations, as control over strategic waterways determines trade routes and military access. Fertile land is also important for geopolitical stability and economic power. Despite the increasing interdependence and globalization, geopolitics remain relevant today, as the quest for resources, border disputes, and competition for strategic advantage remain relevant. Understanding how geographical shifts can reshape global power dynamics is crucial for navigating the challenges and opportunities of our interconnected world. Geopolitics is the study of political power in geographic space, focusing on the relationship between people and space through economic, social, and political activities. It works beyond the state-world border and is dynamic, influenced by both geographical settings and political processes (Cohen, 2003).

Geopolitics is a field that links geography and national strategy, involving disciplines like geography, history, political science, technology, economics, and international relations. It analyzes national, regional, and global order frameworks, focusing on territorial boundaries, strategic resources, and regional power dynamics. Geopolitical considerations significantly shape a country's interests, foreign policy, security strategies, and interactions with other nations. The influence of geography on a nation's vulnerability to threats or adversaries is a fundamental aspect of this analysis (Murray & Grimsley, 1994, in Silwal, 2021).

Methodology

Nepal faces significant foreign policy and national security challenges, primarily because of its geographical context. National interests, political tendencies, global perspectives, and socioeconomic goals influence the country's foreign policy development. While Nepal outlined its foreign policy in 2020 and national security policy in 2019 (originally established in 2016), there is still no clear definition of national security. There is a noticeable lack of coherent and integrated implementation of foreign and national security policies. Various task forces and research initiatives have pointed out the absence of comprehensive documentation and the need for better integration between these policies.

To navigate the complexities of its geopolitical landscape, Nepal must focus on building consensus, engaging in proactive and strategic diplomacy, fostering economic growth, ensuring stability, and showing visionary leadership. To support this effort, the present

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study employed a qualitative research method, using data gathered from a variety of secondary sources. The data collection included documentary materials, such as textbooks, academic journals, reports, magazines, newspapers, and online platforms. For data analysis, the study applied both descriptive and analytical frameworks, enabling a systematic examination of the content within the collected documentation.

Literature Review

Prithvi Narayan Shah, the architect of modern Nepal, strategic vision that remains relevant today, characterized by a deep understanding of power dynamics and a commitment to national survival, includes four core tenets: unity against Western influence, the importance of a strong military, a cautious approach to neighboring superpowers, and a nuanced strategy of offence and defence (Khanal, 2000). Nepal's geopolitical reality remains consistent despite global transformation. The enduring truth "you cannot change your neighbor" highlights the importance of understanding and safeguarding national interests. Nepal, between two colossal powers, faces similar challenges as Prithvi Narayan Shah identified centuries ago. The relevance of Shah's doctrine today is because of the need for Nepal to protect its national interests in a complex and volatile global arena.

This literature review explores the impact of Nepal's geopolitical vulnerability on its foreign policy and national security. The review examines the historical context, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary challenges of Nepal's strategic decision-making, emphasizing the delicate balancing act it must perform to protect its sovereignty and national interests. It shows that Nepal's foreign policy is heavily influenced by its geographical vulnerability, resulting in both opportunities and constraints.

Theoretical Frameworks

Several literatures have discussed the relationship between geopolitics and foreign policy. In this context, realism, which emphasizes the importance of state survival in an anarchic international system, is a lens to understand Nepal's strategic choices. Mearsheimer's (2001, p. 34) offensive realism theory, which suggests states aim to enhance their power and influence, is crucial in comprehending the dynamics of regional power dynamics. Nepal's strategy of not aligning with China or India aims to reduce the risks of domination, reflecting a core principle of realist thinking.

The constructivist approaches, as highlighted by Wendt (1992), focus on how ideas, norms, and identities influence state behaviour. The historical and cultural connections between Nepal and its neighbours extend beyond simple power dynamics. These constructivist factors shape Nepal's interactions with China and India, highlighting relationships with security concerns and perceptions rooted in shared history.

Historical Context: The Legacy of Geopolitics

Nepal's foreign policy has been shaped by its powerful neighbour's perception, using a reactive approach. According to Rose (1998), the country adopted a 'buffer state' strategy during the British era in India to protect its independence, a strategy that still influences its

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foreign policy today. The historical context, including treaties, territorial disputes, and the effects of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, is essential for understanding Nepal's geopolitical position. Bista (2000) discusses how the legacy of past conflicts influences Nepal's concerns about getting caught in the power struggles of larger nations.

The China-India Factor

Nepal's geopolitical relationship with China and India is a complex interplay of diplomacy and strategic interests, requiring a delicate balancing act because of historical ties, economic dependencies, and security concerns. This relationship is crucial for Nepal to maintain sovereignty and national interests, requiring careful equilibrium (Gupta, 2024, August 31). China's Belt and Road Initiative investments and India's economic dominance in Nepal could strain Nepal's national interest and cause tension if it cannot maintain a balanced relationship with these regional rivals, as they pursue different ideological interests (Nepal, 2021).

Foreign Policy and National Security Concerns

Nepal's foreign policy prioritizes national security through a non-alignment stance, aiming to prevent major power conflicts and promote internal development and stability (Bhattarai, 2023 July 20). However, recent geopolitical tensions have heightened pressure on this policy, leading to increased internal instability and ethnic polarization. Nepal's foreign policy prioritizes national security and a non-alignment approach to prevent great power rivalries, promoting internal development and stability, not just as a political stance (Acharya, 2023). The increasing geopolitical rivalry is causing internal instability, and societal cleavages, which is impacting national security (K.C., 2023), (Bhatta & Menge, 2021).

Economic Dependence

Nepal's foreign policy is influenced by its economic vulnerability to neighboring countries, with trade dependence on India shaping strong political ties. Recent Chinese investment offers economic diversification but introduces new challenges. Persistent trade deficits with China and India highlight Nepal's economic dependencies, limiting its geopolitical autonomy. China and India are competing to keep and attain political influence in Nepal (Ranjan & Gurung, 2021).

Political Instability and Internal Dynamics

Domestic instability acts as a driving force for external powers to assert control and interfere in a nation's affairs. Nepal faces internal political instability and external influences that complicate its governance and development efforts. Addressing these challenges effectively is essential for lasting stability and economic growth. The interplay between these factors is pivotal in determining the country's future trajectory. (Jha, 2024 August 14).

Contemporary Challenges

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents Nepal with the potential for significant economic development through improved transportation networks, energy infrastructure, and increased investment. These developments could break Nepal's landlocked isolation, boost trade, and stimulate economic growth. However, India, Nepal's closest partner, views China's growing influence with unease. The growing tensions in Nepal, along with the evolving security environment, pose significant challenges for Nepalese foreign policy.

The literature review illustrates how Nepal's geopolitical position between two major neighbours impacts its foreign policy and national security issues. The prevailing narrative in the literature suggests that Nepal operates within a complex environment shaped by both realist and constructivist principles. Historical context, economic dependence, and internal dynamics are all critical factors that influence Nepal's foreign policy decisions and will continue to do so.

Data Presentation

Nepal's geographical positioning between the substantial powers of Asia—India to the east, west, and south, and the Tibetan region of China to the north—highlights the critical importance of geopolitical factors in shaping both its international relations and domestic policies (Khadka, 2017). In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in the number and intensity of involvement from various geopolitical players. Nepal has emerged as a focal point in the triangular power dynamics involving significant actors, such as India, China, and the United States.

India is widely recognized as the most influential geopolitical player in Nepal. The historical context reveals that Nepal has encountered significant political turmoil and challenges, largely attributed to India's unwarranted interference in its domestic matters. Various forms of intervention, driven by Indian interests, manifest in Nepal, including political, security, trade, economic, ethnic, and religious dimensions, as well as interests in natural resources. These interventions often take the shape of cultural influences.

India has imposed economic blockades on Nepal on four occasions (1962, 1971, 1989, and 2015), cumulatively lasting approximately three years, in pursuit of various strategic objectives (Silwal, 2021). Following the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950, the Indian ambassador in Nepal regularly took part in cabinet meetings with the Nepali government (Dixit, 2020). A significant aspect of Indian interests in Nepal pertains to its hydroelectric potential. India's ongoing interest in Nepal's water resources, coupled with its involvement in the political landscape, facilitates the realization of these objectives (Upreti, 1993). Nepal possesses significant hydroelectric potential that could enhance its economic standing within the region. The establishment of infrastructure dedicated to the generation and export of electricity could catalyze a transformative shift for the nation (Rai, 2019). Nepal encounters geopolitical challenges, particularly from India. During a parliamentary session, Prime Minister Dahal showed that Indian representatives have shown reluctance to purchase electricity generated from hydropower projects in Nepal that are financed through direct Chinese investments (Dahal, 2024).

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The emergence of China as a superpower has concurrently enhanced Nepal's geopolitical significance in recent decades. India's apprehensions are on the rise regarding China's expanding influence and activities in South Asian nations, particularly in Nepal. The central aspect of India's concern pertains to China's developing relationship with Nepal. From India's security viewpoint, it is essential to prevent any substantial involvement by external powers in Nepal (Thapaliya, 1998). Former ambassador Acharya asserts India is dissatisfied with Nepal's external engagement, especially its interactions with China (Acharya, 2024).

In recent years, China has intensified its assertive posture in various South Asian regions by enhancing its multifaceted engagement, which encompasses economic, military, and diplomatic support under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Specifically, regarding Nepal, the bilateral and multilateral development partnerships focused on infrastructure projects—such as railways, highways, and other trans-Himalayan connectivity initiatives—are rapidly advancing. Many observers interpreted the Trade and Transit Agreement signed by KP Oli in 2016 with China as a strategic move for Nepal to reduce its dependency on India for transit routes. During his official visit to Nepal, Xi Jinping underscored China's commitment to supporting Nepal's aspirations for enhanced land connectivity (Dahal, 2020). Four years later, during the official visit of Nepali Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli to Beijing, Chinese President Xi reiterated this support.

... 'China is ready to continue to deepen pragmatic cooperation with Nepal, advance high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and strengthen connectivity cooperation in such fields as ports, transportation, power grids and communications. China is ready to help Nepal accelerate its transformation from a 'land-locked country' to a 'land-linked country', continue to support Nepal's economic and social development within its capacity, and encourage Chinese enterprises to invest and do business in Nepal' (MOFA, China 2024).

The primary factor driving the United States' interest in Nepal is its strategic geopolitical position. A significant aspect of this interest stems from Nepal's geographical closeness to China, an emerging global power, particularly concerning the Tibetan issue. China's aim seems to be the reduction of Western influence and the suppression of anti-China sentiments among the Tibetan population in Nepal (Bhattarai, 2016). In response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a comprehensive strategy aimed at establishing a cross-continental geo-economic and geostrategic framework through infrastructure development and connectivity—the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) was planned (Khatri, 2019).

Regional power dynamics, characterized by conflict and cooperation, have been particularly pronounced during the pandemic. India consistently dismissed Nepal's appeals for discussions regarding the border dispute involving Lipulek, Limpiyadhura, and Kalapani, citing the COVID-19 situation as a rationale (Acharya & Mainali, 2020). Furthermore, India has postponed negotiations with Nepal and has taken unilateral actions concerning the land use plan in question. The Indian government intends to use this territory for the Mansarovar Yatra. The 23rd meeting of the special representatives from India and China highlighted this situation, underscoring its significance.

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'The SRs exchanged views on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest. They provided positive directions for cross-border cooperation and exchanges including resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, data sharing on trans-border rivers and border trade. They agreed on the salience of stable, predictable and amicable India-China relations for regional and global peace and prosperity' (MOEA, India, 2024).

Nepal has received warnings from both the United States and India about the lack of transparency in China's financial agreements and loans (Imran, 2021). Despite these concerns, during Prime Minister Oli's visit, Nepal formalized "aid financing modalities" with China (MOFA, 2024). Following extensive high-level negotiations, Nepal not only accepted the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant but also entered agreements for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aligns with the country's interests. The geopolitical ambitions of these major powers coincide with Nepal's national objectives, as they strategically position themselves sequentially. As a result, the significant geopolitical interests—along with the conditions attached to their aid—create challenges for Nepal in formulating and implementing a dynamic and relevant foreign policy.

Equi-proximity and Non-Alline: A Pragmatic Approach

A nation between two major countries can be seen as either helpful or disadvantageous, depending primarily on its diplomatic actions and interactions with those neighbours. The key factor is how the country engages with them. If Nepal takes a more proactive approach in its relations with neighbouring countries and allies, while prioritizing the interests of its people and state, its geographical position could become more beneficial than that of other nations. Traditionally, Nepal has followed policies of equidistance, non-alignment, and neutrality because of its strategic location. The country cannot afford to align itself with any significant global power bloc or strategic alliance (KC & Bhattarai, 2021 in KC, 2023). KC further argues that if Nepal were to align itself with either the United States' State Partnership Program (SPP) or China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), it would likely face more complex challenges.

In the past, none of the governments could implement the equi-proximity policy because they were often accusing one another of being pro-Chinese, pro-Indian, or pro-British. These prejudices and tendencies to assign blame have been significant drawbacks in Nepali domestic politics. Former Prime Minister Pushpakamal Dahal criticized Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's visit to China, referring to it as playing the "China card." Dahal stated, "Oli is playing the 'China card' by going to Beijing Nepal should balance its ties" (Dahal, 2024). Given these circumstances, the equi-proximity and non-alignment policy is well justified in Nepal's geopolitical landscape.

Linking Landlocked Regions Through a Vibrant Bridge Vision

Several factors show that Nepal's territory, because of its geographic setting, served as an entrepot between Tibet and India (Sharma, 2081 BS). Sharma further explains that during the medieval period, the Malla kings of the Kathmandu Valley maintained strong trade relations with both neighbouring countries. This vibrant trade route linked these two large nations during that time. Nepal's geo-strategic location creates dynamic connections by

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utilizing trans-Himalayan connectivity to promote cooperation between Nepal, China, and India, highlighting the role of Nepal as a vibrant bridge between these rapidly growing economies (Aryal, 2022). Nepal's importance was not limited to serving as a buffer zone between India and China.

By developing the China-Nepal-India (C-N-I) corridor, Nepal can enhance its connectivity and strengthen its economy, benefiting from its relationships with both India and China (Guo, 2021). To promote regional cooperation, Nepal can leverage its strategic location within Asia to transform itself from being landlocked to becoming a land-linked nation, acting as a bridge between countries (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022). This shift from a buffer state to a bridge nation is not only an economic issue; it also significantly impacts national interests and requires a re-framing of foreign policy and national security priorities. Reviving Nepal's historical role as an entrepot could be a crucial step in this transformation, enabling the country to evolve from being landlocked to a vibrant land link.

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Beyond the Geopolitical Determinant

Several factors influence a nation's foreign policy and national security. Besides geographical considerations, domestic politics, historical experiences, economic interests, religious and cultural influences, technological advancements, and public opinion play significant roles. The perceptions of decision-makers are also crucial in shaping foreign policy and national security. In Nepal, the concept of national security has evolved beyond just geopolitical factors; it encompasses a combination of sociocultural, political, military, economic, and human elements (Silwal, 2021).

Necessity of A Pragmatic National Security Strategy

Geopolitics, national interest, and foreign policy are commonly discussed concepts in the Nepali socio-political landscape, particularly concerning national security. However, national security is the least developed and understood tenet in Nepal. According to Silwal (2021), national security is an ambiguous, under-explored, and relatively new concept in the country. The evolution of national security policies stretches from Prithvi Narayan Shah's "Divyaupadesh" to the National Security Policy of 2019. A policy without an applicable strategy is limited in paper or almost disfunction. Despite this historical journey of doctrine and policy, there is no comprehensive security strategy for effective policy execution. The core elements of national interest in foreign policy and national security call for a pragmatic and combined approach. To address these needs, national security policy and foreign policy require an integrated grand strategy.

Discussion

Flint and Cohen provide a crucial framework for identifying the geopolitical factors shaping Nepal's foreign policy and national security. The existing body of scholarly work further clarifies the connection between Nepal's ambitions and the research. Nepal has been shifting away from its traditional role as a buffer state and redefining itself as a vital economic corridor connecting its immediate neighbours. To achieve this, Nepal must actively explore connectivity beyond its borders by effectively integrating proposed connectivity initiatives at bilateral, trilateral, and regional levels. Well-managing the triangular competition (US, China and India), and promoting trilateral cooperation (China, Nepal and India) is a parallel and prominent task to grasp the opportunity given by the geo-strategic location of Nepal. Current facts show power nations are not only in conflict but also in cooperation. The US-China and China-India relationship has been engaged in bilateral trade and economic cooperation in many aspects. If Nepal recaps economic diplomacy and smart foreign policy to get the maximum benefit from these nations, it ultimately provides an important foundation for Nepal's prosperity. For this, Nepal's external relations will also become reliable and sustainable by maintaining equi-proximity with neighbours, adopting cordial relations with other nations, and non-alien in security strategies against each other. So, seizing the effect of triangular competition and increasing trilateral cooperation is the best pragmatic solution for Nepal.

Bridges and land links are likely the only metaphors for Nepal's geopolitics and strategic concept, till now. This metaphor can become a reality if Nepal is strategically sound, has a smart foreign policy, and rises as a politically stable nation. Alongside the geopolitical considerations, political stability and a self-reliant economy, consistent smart foreign policy, domestic common consensus about foreign policy and national security, and ignorance of demographic strength are major contemporary challenges in Nepal. In the border sense, national security should be evaluated based on new dimensions of security notion. Citizen-centric modern security apparatus appears at the forefront. Adapting the end, ways and means approaches to fully using national power (diplomacy, information, military and economy) is an inextricable concern for national security and foreign policy success in Nepal.

Conclusion

Nepal, in the Himalayas, faces increasing global attention because of its strategic location and geopolitical implications. The country's foreign and national security policies are intertwined, with both aiming to safeguard and promote the nation's well-being. Geopolitics is a significant factor in shaping Nepal's foreign policy and national security posture. Despite challenges, Nepal has significant resources and unique demography that can empower it to pursue an independent foreign policy and safeguard its national security. The key lies in the intelligent implementation of a smart foreign policy, rooted in principles like equi-proximity, non-alignment, and the philosophy of "amity with all, enmity with none." Nepal can act as a land link bridge, cautiously implementing it with its immediate neighbors and the rest of the world. This strategic approach can effectively serve the nation's interests and align perfectly with its national security objectives. The rising rivalry between the

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United States and China can also be seen as an opportunity for Nepal. By implementing a shrewd and adaptable foreign policy alongside a robust national security strategy, Nepal can leverage this geopolitical landscape to its advantage. A pragmatic approach, based on the evolving dynamics of the region and the world, is crucial to address the problems and challenges induced by the current geopolitical climate. In conclusion, Nepal's foreign policy and national security are inextricably linked to the geopolitical realities of its location, with major global powers vying for influence in the region. By leveraging its unique position and resources, and cautiously implementing a "land link bridge" concept, Nepal can both safeguard its national security and promote its national interests, even amid the great power rivalry.

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