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Richard D. Hooker Jr.

Ricky L. Waddell

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The Future of Conventional Deterrence

Captain Richard D. Hooker, Jr., U.S. Army
and
Captain Ricky L. Waddell, U.S. Army

THE 1990s WILL SEE THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW and qualitatively different world order that will require the United States to recast its traditional approaches to foreign policy and national security. For four decades national security policy in the United States, largely defined by the superpower rivalry, was heavily dependent upon strategic nuclear deterrence. Today, as the era of bipolarity recedes, we may confidently expect new and different challenges to our important interests abroad. Nuclear weapons will not be as effective in deterring the kind of potential adversaries we are likely to see, because nuclear weapons will not serve as a credible response against regional powers in the developing world. For the first time since 1945, we will see conventional deterrence resuming its place at the center of U.S. national security policy.

Deterrence is commonly defined as preventing an opponent from pursuing a specific course of action by creating the expectation that the perceived costs of the act would exceed the perceived gains.¹ Deterrence should be distinguished from *compellence*, which seeks to oblige an adversary to do one's will through the threat or use of force. While military force is the key in both cases, the distinction is one of its active versus passive use.² In the recent crisis in the Gulf, the deployment of airborne troops to Saudi Arabia in early August represented a clear attempt to deter an Iraqi invasion of the kingdom. Our diplomatic, economic, and military efforts to force Iraq out of Kuwait, on the other hand, were an attempt to compel withdrawal—a substantively different and arguably more difficult undertaking.³

The authors are assistant professors on the social sciences faculty of the U.S. Military Academy. Captain Hooker, an infantryman with Airborne and Pathfinder experience, holds a doctorate from the University of Virginia. Captain Waddell is an engineer, a Rhodes Scholar, and a doctoral candidate. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not represent the official position of the Department of Defense, Department of the Army, the U.S. Military Academy, or any other official agency. This article was written in fall 1991.

Deterrence in the Cold War Era

After the end of the Second World War, the rise of the Soviet Union as the chief threat to U.S. security engendered a wholly unique response. Pressures for rapid demobilization, and a strong U.S. technological advantage (particularly in nuclear weapons), caused a rapid devaluation of American conventional forces. Land, naval, and tactical air forces shrank rapidly, while strategic air forces assumed the chief burden of deterring a military confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The Korean conflict should have served as a sharp reminder of the continuing utility of conventional forces for deterrence in circumstances where nuclear weapons were not, for political or strategic reasons, appropriate. After Korea, however, the United States returned to a policy of reliance on strategic nuclear forces to deter the U.S.S.R. Perhaps paradoxically, conventional forces were especially de-emphasized in the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower. The "New Look" doctrine of massive retaliation, as articulated by its chief architect, John Foster Dulles, called for instant and large-scale use of nuclear weapons to deter or defeat Soviet-sponsored threats to national security.⁴ Soviet nuclear capabilities continued to grow in the 1950s, and by the end of the decade the U.S.S.R. could deploy a small number of ballistic missiles to threaten the continental United States. As the Kennedy administration came into office, U.S. reliance on strategic nuclear deterrence and on the mystique of nuclear weapons had almost completely eclipsed conventional forces in the strategic calculus.⁵

The 1960s and 1970s saw a partial revival of the concept of conventional deterrence in the doctrine of "Flexible Response." Heavily influenced by Maxwell Taylor, the Flexible Response doctrine recognized that an all-or-nothing threat of nuclear retaliation lacked credibility in many potential regional or secondary scenarios.⁶ While retaining the emphasis on containment that had become a fixture of American foreign policy, the Kennedy (and later Johnson) administration moved to strengthen and diversify conventional forces to provide a better capability to respond across the spectrum of conflict. At no time did U.S. conventional forces ever threaten to displace strategic nuclear forces as the backbone of deterrence, but the existence of a significant conventional component in the deterrence equation dates from this time.

Disengagement from Vietnam and the achievement of nuclear parity by the Soviet Union reinigorated nuclear deterrence in the 1970s, and the salience of the conventional component declined. Reduced defense outlays, a decline in quality throughout the force, and a profound sense of demoralization and an unwillingness to use conventional forces after the Vietnam experience all contributed to this trend. The proliferation in this period of Soviet-backed insurgencies in the Third World was undoubtedly stimulated, at least in part, by

a perceived reluctance on the part of the United States to commit its conventional forces to contain Soviet adventurism abroad.⁷

The 1980s saw a striking improvement in the quality of the U.S. military establishment and a resurgence in conventional forces to match improvements in nuclear forces. Containment still provided the framework for U.S. foreign policy, and Flexible Response continued to serve as the official basis of U.S. and Nato defense planning.⁸ Yet while force modernization, prepositioning of equipment for reinforcing echelons, and new doctrine improved the conventional component of deterrence, Nato continued to rely on nuclear weapons—and the strong possibility of rapid escalation across the nuclear threshold—to deter. Lacking a system of conscription and unwilling to fund the kind of conventional forces that could hope to stop the Warsaw Pact at the inter-German border, the United States did not move to reverse the balance of its nuclear and conventional forces. Its strategy of fielding diversified and survivable strategic nuclear weapons to deter a strategic nuclear exchange, and modest forward-deployed forces (U.S. and allied, with tactical and theater nuclear weapons) to deter aggression in Europe and Korea, continued essentially unchanged. This model, broadly applied, is descriptive of the U.S. approach to deterrence throughout the Cold War period.

The dominance of nuclear weapons in deterrence is also reflected in the literature. A large body of sophisticated analysis exists on the subject of nuclear deterrence, while conventional deterrence as a separate and bounded analytical concept in its own right has been largely neglected.⁹

Theory of Conventional Deterrence

Some preliminary and cautionary notes are in order. The existence of both nuclear and conventional forces (both of which are represented in each of the American armed services) implies a relationship between the two that should be kept in mind. No theory of deterrence can ignore the fact that both capabilities will influence the behavior and decision-making processes of potential adversaries. While the probability of their use may increase or decrease according to the nature of the threat and the relative balance of forces, in all but the smallest or lowest-intensity scenarios nuclear weapons will play a role in deterrence even when conventional forces clearly predominate.

An obvious, and forceful, argument is that nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation in the Third World will keep nuclear deterrence at center stage in U.S. national security strategy. However, while proliferation undoubtedly complicates the security calculus, it will not prevent the supersession of strategic nuclear forces by conventional ones as primary agents of deterrence. Regional powers possessing small, crude nuclear arsenals will not be tempted to press the United States when faced by credible and capable conventional forces,

particularly when any nuclear exchange will be immeasurably more costly to the lesser power. Arguably, a U.S. nuclear response to an opponent's first use that was confined to his military forces could be politically feasible for the United States. Any rational cost-gain calculation suggests that possession of small numbers of nuclear weapons will not in and of itself make adventurism much more likely.

Nuclear proliferation makes conventional deterrence all the more important, but not necessarily more difficult. Nuclear *compellence*, on the other hand, becomes both more difficult and fraught with risk, for two reasons. First, a genuine threat to use nuclear weapons against a regional adversary with nuclear weapons of its own might not appear credible given the almost inevitable political repercussions stemming from massive casualties or from crossing what is seen as a moral threshold. Second, if accepted, the threat could elicit a spasm launch by the adversary. Massive U.S. casualties and lack of international support for a U.S. response in kind (a nuclear attack on threatening U.S. forces, if confined to military targets, by a smaller power would seem justifiable to many Third World nations) would create grave political obstacles to effective nuclear retaliation. Thus it becomes crucial to deter so that it will not be necessary to compel.

Perceptions. The heart of deterrence, whether nuclear, conventional, or a combination of both, is the ability to create fear by threatening pain. The psychology of deterrence is thus its most elemental feature.¹⁰ Even where very powerful forces are arrayed, deterrence may fail if the threat to use force is not perceived as credible. Credibility is more than a quantitative measure of the balance of forces, and more than a qualitative assessment of technological sophistication or fighting capacity. Deterrence also encompasses the will or resolve of the decision maker, first to commit force and then to stay the course when the costs begin to mount—and also, indeed, his perception of the will and resolve of his opposite number.

To some extent the credibility of the threat to use force in response to provocation is a function of domestic political considerations and the structure of the state seeking to deter. Totalitarian or authoritarian states are characterized by a highly centralized decision setting that is resistant to and largely independent of outside pressures; public opinion or consensus among bureaucratic elites may not be a factor in the decision to use force. Because the decision to fight can be taken by a single dominant personality or a small group of leaders, with no need to seek consensus or satisfy a brittle or fragile popular constituency, the credibility of a threat by such states to use force may be very high indeed.

By the same token, Western industrialized democracies, though they may field very potent and capable combat forces, can yet suffer from a perceived lack of resolution or political will. The very factors which contribute to the strength

and stability of their political systems—democratic accountability, separated powers, a free press, and guaranteed rights to organize, petition, and express differing political points of view—can paralyze or hinder their decision to mobilize and deploy military forces. The oft-noted American tendency to treat wars or conflicts as ideological crusades is undoubtedly a reflection of the necessity to create and sustain unity and consensus in a polity noted for its heterogeneity.

The threat of pain, however great, is distinguishable from the threat of annihilation, whether physical or political.¹¹ This raises the question of what can be called the *threshold of pain*. Conventional deterrence, unlike nuclear deterrence, is really about war at the margins. The economic deprivation and massive casualties, for instance, inflicted upon North Vietnam (not only in the second Indochina conflict but also in the first) represented a level of pain immeasurably higher on an objective scale than that suffered by the Americans or the French; on a relative scale, however, this was not the case at all. Vietnamese passions were fully engaged, their political objectives virtually unlimited. When compared to the open-ended commitments and vaguely defined political objectives of the Western powers, the Vietnamese possessed much greater determination, endurance, and resolve. Some appreciation of an opponent's capacity to endure pain, again as much a psychological question as a physical one, is needed before one can accurately formulate the calculus of costs versus gains.

Inflicting Pain. Resolve is necessary, then, for credibility—but it is not sufficient. The forces themselves must be perceived as capable of inflicting a level of damage, a degree of pain, if you will, great enough to deter. The different components of conventional deterrence are very closely interrelated and mutually dependent, but for theoretical purposes we can add capability, sustainability, and deployability; these, along with political resolve, complete our paradigm.

Capability—the ability of military forces to carry out their wartime missions (in a word, to fight)—is a function both of their size, nature, and quality. As lethality increases with technology it becomes progressively more difficult to determine the minimum level of force needed to deter, or if deterrence fails, to prevail, in a given scenario.¹² Air power may in certain circumstances supply a deficiency in ground forces, and smaller but high-quality conventional forces may suffice in place of a larger force which is more poorly trained, equipped, or led.¹³ What is most vital, however, is to consider not how we might view the combat capability of our forces but how that capability is perceived by our opponent. The two can be worlds apart.

Sustainability is critical to the perception of strength because of the inordinate material demands made upon modern states when they go to war. The Falklands War illustrated how the deterrent effect represented by very high-quality combat forces can be weakened by the impression that sustaining such a force will be

difficult or impossible. Britain's ability to operate at the end of an extremely long logistical tail was astonishing and played a major role in her eventual victory. But the British government's reduction in spending for force projection and sustainment in the months prior to the Argentine invasion played its part in the failure of deterrence that brought about the conflict in the first place. Battlefield systems, fuel and ammunition, spare parts, personnel replacements, and water and rations are consumed rapidly and must be replaced for continued effectiveness. Sustainability is nearly all-encompassing: industrial infrastructure, reserve stocks, trained reserves, and the ability to resupply at very great distances from the homeland all play a part in supporting combat forces abroad.

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Deployability, or strategic mobility, is closely related to sustainability in that the same assets are employed. The same military air-lift and sea-lift resources that provide the means to project a force are also used to sustain it. The ability to project force in strength represents a singular advantage for the United States; no other nation possesses the ability to move large combat forces over strategic distances on short notice and keep them supplied. It is important to note that while strategic air lift can move politically significant military forces to the point of confrontation, only sea lift can move and sustain heavy ground forces. The airplane will not be an efficient platform for transporting main battle tanks for a very long time to come. As Mahan noted in the nineteenth century, maritime power means more than naval warships.¹⁴ It also means a merchant fleet, trained merchant mariners, dockyard facilities, and a healthy shipbuilding industry.

Whereas the military capacity and political resolve of the individual state are the foundations of conventional deterrence, alliances or coalitions (whether existing or formed in response to specific crises) are now more the rule than the exception. The end of the Cold War did away with the ready-made ideological justification of anti-communism and is making the process of building domestic and international support for the threat or use of force more difficult. The support (moral or otherwise) of other nations and the international community will be more, not less, essential. This may not mean that a lack of U.N. support, for example, will induce states to forgo the military instrument entirely; the demise, however, of the ideological rivalry that previously characterized most conflicts now places a premium on the moral imprimatur of international approval as a basis for the use of force.

Heretofore we have used the concepts of force and threat of force almost interchangeably. This is intentional because though measurable uncertainty can contribute to the nuclear variety of deterrence, we doubt that it can work for

the conventional case. That is, though any reasonable chance of a nuclear response is generally sufficient to deter because of the catastrophic consequences of miscalculation, this is not necessarily true in the conventional realm. There, because the credibility of the threatened response is so important, the threat of force may be almost indistinguishable from an a priori decision to use force. The threat which does not appear to be genuine is not a credible threat. Thus, to effectively deter with conventional forces one must strive to create in the opponent high confidence that the response threatened will in fact be delivered. That may mean taking steps which look like war. Indeed, that is the whole point. If we can succeed in convincing an opponent that a specific act on his part will inevitably result in more pain than gain, deterrence is almost assured.

Contiguous versus Extended Conventional Deterrence

As the international order restructures itself along more multipolar lines, we can anticipate that deterrence strategies that incorporate standing conventional forces forward-deployed in close proximity to the adversary will give way to strategies relying more on the threat of retaliation by expeditionary forces launched from outside the region. Previously the United States wielded *contiguous* conventional deterrence, stationing ground forces directly opposite opposing forces in high-value areas (such as Europe or Korea), guaranteeing an instant and certain response to aggression. Deterrence by strategic nuclear forces operated in much the same way, since a nuclear strike by either side was instantly detectable, with retaliation certain in a matter of minutes.

With the decreased salience of contiguous deterrence now comes a potential increase in the possibility of conflict in areas other than Central Europe. It was long argued that a stable strategic nuclear balance subsumed instabilities at the theater nuclear and the tactical conventional levels.¹⁵ Today, however, with a stable nuclear balance at lower levels of tension and a prospect even of an end to nuclear rivalry between the superpowers, the conventional capabilities of many Third World countries rise dramatically in importance.

Additionally, during the bipolar Cold War the superpowers tended, due to the fears of escalation, to respond immediately to unsettling events anywhere in the world. Any gain by one was often seen as a loss for the other;¹⁶ consequently the superpowers frequently acted to dampen conflict on the periphery.¹⁷ With the erosion of Soviet power and influence, and the low probability that the Soviets will reassert themselves globally in the near future, the potential for conflict in the developing world is measurably increased.

Arms control agreements, arms reductions, the disappearance of the Soviet threat, and the emergence (or reemergence) of regional threats have now created a new basis for deterrence. *Extended conventional deterrence*—detering distant adversaries and protecting friendly states with the threat of projecting

conventional force—will become the centerpiece of U.S. strategic deterrence as we move into the next century.¹⁸ This is especially true now that the U.S. Navy is removing tactical nuclear weapons from its ships and submarines. As our standing presence overseas declines in response to powerful changes in the international system, our ability and will to project conventional force abroad in defense of vital interests becomes correspondingly more important.

We emphasize that this discussion does not weight any form of conventional power—air, sea, space, or ground—more than another. The composition of forces is highly situation-dependent and in a given situation one service may predominate. For most imaginable scenarios posing serious threats to U.S. interests, all four capabilities will be important. Modern war is, after all, multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. The air-sea-ground distinctions we often hold so dear are largely artificial in light of the interconnectedness of modern war.

We have described deterrence as the attempt to influence an adversary to forgo a contemplated course of action for fear that costs would exceed potential gains, and we have introduced a new paradigm that alters the positions of nuclear and conventional forces in deterrence theory. We have also distinguished between extended and contiguous conventional deterrence, and stressed the necessity for political resolve, for capable forces, and for a strong force projection capability as the foundations of deterrence in the place of strategic nuclear weapons and forward-deployed forces. The recent crisis in the Gulf provides an illustrative example, a good opportunity to test these theoretical prescriptions against reality.

The Failure of Deterrence in the Persian Gulf, 1990

Though some disagree, we can view the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as a deterrence failure. Despite expressions of concern for the stability of the Gulf region and for the free flow of oil (such as the Carter Doctrine, the Awacs sale, the formation of Central Command, and the Persian Gulf deployment of 1987-1988), the U.S. government sent mixed signals when it tilted toward Iraq in the Gulf War and when it failed to react vigorously to Iraqi rhetoric and troop deployments against Kuwait in July 1990. This experience points out how difficult it is to frame and articulate in advance the interests we deem worth fighting for. Obviously we can not threaten to use force in all or even most instances where U.S. interests are threatened. In this case, an explicit or implicit declaration of intent, because of the implications for Saudi security and the world price of oil, to oppose military action against Kuwait with force could have strengthened deterrence significantly.

Would such a threat have been credible? Saddam may well have reasoned that our announced plans to make deep cuts in ground forces and defense outlays, as well as our apparent aversion to the use of force except in low-intensity situations, signalled an unwillingness to respond decisively. He may have assessed further that we might fear a hostile Arab reaction to a large U.S. presence in the Gulf (which could complicate Arab-Israeli relations already strained by the Intifada); this also would have encouraged him to discount a military response from the United States. Finally, a seeming U.S. inability to move large ground forces quickly by sea may well have convinced Saddam that he had little to fear from American threats to use force—at least any made prior to his invasion of Kuwait.

Yet there are grounds to assert that deterrence failed chiefly because we had failed to articulate clearly our interests and our resolve to defend them—in other words, that this deterrence failure was primarily political. In the authors' view, Saddam would not have invaded Kuwait had he foreseen the magnitude of the American and allied response. There were, to be sure, problems with projecting

“Extended conventional deterrence . . . will become the centerpiece of U.S. strategic deterrence as we move into the next century.”

large and heavy ground forces over strategic distances. These difficulties were mitigated by our ability to mass overwhelming air power and to shut off Iraqi oil exports by land and sea, and by the prospect of yet another demonstration of our capacity for logistical innovation and strategic reach. Militarily, Saddam could not win unless U.S. resolve faltered—which, of course, is exactly what Iraq counted on.

Even had this crisis ultimately resolved itself otherwise than it did, perhaps politically through negotiation or economically through the U.N. embargo, America's ability to deter with conventional forces would have been likely to improve, at least for the near term. We showed ourselves capable and willing to deploy extraordinary forces at great distances to protect our interests. We did so with the approbation of the international community and the support of moderate regimes in the region. Perhaps most importantly, the U.S. military response was supported by a solid majority at home.

These advantages will not necessarily inhere in future crises. We must be careful not to apply too broadly specific lessons drawn from our experiences in the Gulf. If anything is certain, it is that future crises will have their own context and present their own challenges. Thus it is important to recognize the broad foundations of change, as we have attempted to do here, without being overly prescriptive about future conflict.

Desert Storm is not a script for the future, though many organizations and institutions will so interpret it through the lens of self-interest. Its importance lies in what can be learned about broadly framed military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities and potentialities, not in projecting the unique context of the Gulf War into the future as a model for structuring forces and formulating strategy.

Where conventional capability and credibility combine in support of defined U.S. interests, we can have some confidence in the efficacy of a revived conventional deterrence. But it is a fragile thing, resting not only on tangible resources and demonstrated resolve but also on effective communication of capability and intent, filtered through a screen of domestic politics and international sensibilities.

The problems associated with extended conventional deterrence as an operational model for national security should not be underrated. They are complex and various and must be approached as such. As the world settles into a new and perhaps more unsettling pattern of relations between states, we must avoid impulses to think wishfully, but rather strive to think clearly and accurately about a changing world. One way to start is to rethink our traditional reliance on nuclear weapons and focus on the growing importance of conventional forces. Prudence and pragmatism argue for adaptive policies and strategies that take these changes into account.

Notes

1. John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), p. 14.
2. Robert J. Art, "To What Ends Military Power," *International Security*, April 1980, p. 8.
3. Robert Jervis, "Offense, Defense and the Security Dilemma," in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, eds., *International Politics* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1985), 2nd ed., p. 204.
4. William W. Kaufman, *Planning Conventional Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1982), p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Mearsheimer, p. 13.
7. Angola, Ethiopia-Somalia, Mozambique, Namibia, and South Yemen, as well as the spectacular invasion of Afghanistan, all represented Soviet challenges during this period that elicited only feeble responses from the United States. See Stephen S. Kaplan, *Diplomacy of Power* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1981), pp. 148-190.
8. Richard K. Betts, "Conventional Deterrence: Predictive Uncertainty and Policy Confidence," *World Politics*, January 1985, p. 153.
9. The large body of literature on deterrence is too extensive to summarize here. Suffice it to say that deterrence received new emphasis from the heightened Cold War tensions of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Scholars applied new quantitative and psychological methodologies, which were often at odds with one another, to the study of cases. See "The Rational Deterrence Debate: A Symposium," *World Politics*, January 1989, for an encapsulation of these studies and the competing methodologies. Although some of these studies included cases of purely conventional deterrence (cf. Paul K. Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review*, June 1988), the clear motivating principle underlying the studies was the importance of deterring a nuclear exchange. Where the studies had an explicitly conventional focus, the principal issue was the defense of the Central Front of Nato and how this ultimately was linked to the escalatory ladder. See the following collections of essays on this debate: James R. Golden, Asa A. Clark, and Bruce E. Arlinghaus, eds., *Conventional Deterrence* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1984) and Steven E. Miller, ed., *Conventional Forces and American Defense Policy* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986).

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10. "Deterrence is a psychological as well as an objective capability." Amos A. Jordan and William J. Taylor, *U.S. National Security: Policy and Process* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1984), revised ed., p. 224.

11. While the phenomenon is not unknown in modern times, states are not generally wiped off the map in conventional conflicts.

12. In our view, deterrence is not an operational mission, despite frequent pronouncements to the contrary. For example, the first sentence in the army's capstone manual, *FM100-5 Operations*, reads, "The overriding mission of U.S. forces is to deter war." Forces cannot train to deter; they can only train to fight. Deterrence is almost wholly a political phenomenon, albeit one grounded in military strength. It is an effect and a political goal, not a military mission per se, and constant reminders that deterrence, not war-fighting, has top operational priority can confuse and distract both soldiers and leaders. At least at the conventional level, a capacity to fight and fight well contributes most to deterrence.

13. At some point, of course, size will always matter. Quality subsumes state of training, level of leadership, tactical mobility, how well equipped the force is and how high its level of motivation and esprit.

14. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890), p. 138.

15. This argument is presented in Glenn H. Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," *Art and Jervis*, pp. 226-227.

16. The best theoretical discussion of the requirements of bipolarity is in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979). See particularly pp. 170-174.

17. For example, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. acted to dampen the India-Pakistan War of 1971 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

18. "Extended" has a double meaning here: first, the sense that the U.S. security shield we extend over our allies (such as Saudi Arabia or Japan) will now have a stronger conventional flavor; second, that we will now have to deter at extended distances from the United States, since reliance on large numbers of forward-deployed troops will decline.

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