

**ASIA PROGRAM**

# **CHINA'S FORMIDABLE RISE AMID UNCERTAINTY**

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**ASIA FOCUS #62**



President Xi Jinping's bold efforts to turn China into a global superpower by 2049, when the Communist Party (CPC) celebrates its centenary, are promising but stand on uncertain fundamentals.

Despite Xi's formidable determination, China's rise is not taking place in a power vacuum. It will have to contend with the United States, European Union, India, Japan, Russia and others. Earlier periods when opportunities arose for rising powers to acquire strength were marked by declining empires like the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and colonial empires of the 20th century and untenable ideologies like the Nazis and Soviet versions of communism.

China's military and economic drives have already caused enough apprehension in its neighbourhood for competitors to start banding together to balance its growing power. Each of those neighbours has geographical advantages capable of constraining Xi's ambitions despite being weaker than China. Xi will need more than wealth and military power to overcome geographical hurdles. He will need to build trust, which is always in short supply in geopolitics.

Apprehensions about Xi's ambitions for power are forming a quicksand for his idealistic concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind", which he underlined at a high-level meeting of world political parties called by the CPC in early December 2017. The concept calls for "open, inclusive, beneficial, balanced, and win-win economic globalization to deliver benefits to all countries". It suggests "fair, just and shared security to jointly eliminate the root cause of war".<sup>1</sup>

Some hopeful signs for achieving Xi's vision of a shared future of mankind emerged at a meeting in Delhi on December 15, 2017 of foreign ministers from China, Russia and India. They reaffirmed their desire to establish a "just and equitable international order based on international law and featuring mutual respect, fairness, [and] justice in international relations". Their trilateral forum "is not directed against any other country," they said.

Another sign is Xi's desire to gather a new team by March 2018 to guide China's \$12 trillion economy through the next five years, including challenges from the excess capacity of key industries and ballooning debt. Liu He, a key economic advisor to Xi, is likely to be named vice-premier to lead the team, according to "sources with knowledge of the arrangement", cited by the South China Morning Post.

Xi's insistence on flexibility in decision-making to keep up with economic, social, cultural and technological changes is another positive sign. Some of that flexibility is achieved

<sup>1</sup> CPC Congress 2017; [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-10/21/c\\_136694478.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-10/21/c_136694478.htm)

through a form of consultative democracy including eight political formations to improve the efficacy of decisions. It remains to be seen whether such limited consultations are enough to prevent Xi's team from becoming isolated from the needs of ordinary citizens, as is often the case in single-party administrations.

Pushed forward by Xi, the CPC is proactively seeking international acceptance as a political party that offers examples of good economic and social governance for developing countries. Acceptance as a political party like any other would be unusual because CPC does not have to compete against rivals in free and fair elections and its members make up most of China's parliament, executive, judiciary, and senior police, military and media officials. They occupy high ranks in all Chinese public-sector enterprises and many large private companies.

Xi sees CPC's omnipresence as the indispensable strength that motors China's disciplined forward movement, unlike Western-style democracies where administrative and policy disruptions can occur after each election when power changes hands. He does not seek to export a CPC "model" but wants a fair hearing of how its governance has turned China into a great economic, cultural and military power from a global backwater just 35 years ago. He hopes that fair hearing will persuade many developing countries to adapt some of his ideas for their own needs instead of struggling to emulate Western-style democracy. But a long march is still ahead of him.

Yet, a clear motivator is CPC's success in moving away from "Made in China" to the new "Created in China" designation to celebrate its high-flying gains in expertise since 2007 in many areas of manufacturing, technology and the new economy.<sup>2</sup>

## **AMBITION, VULNERABILITY AND BALANCE**

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India, a fractious democracy and China's largest neighbour, is apprehensive about Xi's ambitions although it supports many of his high-minded ideas as voiced at the CPC Congress in October 2017 and later. Prudently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has begun a trajectory of projecting military and economic power in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific regions together with the US, Australia, Japan, Vietnam and others. He is also warily eyeing Chinese economic and military inroads in Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

China's rise as a military and economic behemoth is inevitable and realization of Xi's "China dream" could be positive for the world. However, everyone in China's neighbourhood is reacting cautiously as they weigh potential positives against their apprehensions. Most countries including India do not doubt Xi's peaceful intentions and

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<sup>2</sup> New Era of Socialism; [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/04/c\\_136799666.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/04/c_136799666.htm)

think there is no need to contain China's rise. But they seem determined to balance its burgeoning power by increasing their own strengths, individually or in groups.

In that balance, Japan may hold its own against China even without its US ally. Indonesia is a rising power building up its naval forces. Russia may bend before China's wealth because of US and EU sanctions but it remains a military superpower. Even South Korea and Taiwan are no push-overs since they are significant economic powers.

But foreign reactions are not the chief uncertainties facing Xi Jinping's ambitions. China also has internal vulnerabilities. It is already undergoing an "economic rebalance" by shifting from an export-driven to consumer-driven economy. Growth has slowed a little and the economy has a large and rising debt burden in state-owned companies, which are the country's main economic actors.

The government is still struggling to find pathways for the structural economic reforms needed to rebalance its economy and weed out inefficient companies and bad debts. China is rich but Xi will need more than economic and military reforms to deliver the prosperity and quality of life he desires for his country's people. Other countries may not buy into the CPC example without credible signs that it can consistently do more for the people beyond its past achievements. The apprehension is that CPC methods may be more suited to retaining power in the party's hands than allowing citizens to grow in creativity and long-term prosperity.

Undeniably, the CPC has delivered a string of economic miracles against great odds in such a disparate and vast country with 1.3 billion people. Its models of economic and social governance deserve close thought to see whether they might be adapted to the needs of developing countries.

Deng Xiaoping's socialist market economy triggered in 1978 is the third great model of economic governance after Adam Smith's capitalist theory of the 18th century and Joseph Stalin's central planning of 1929. Deng's theory proved to be impressively successful because it consistently delivered significant growth and societal benefits every year for more than 30 years, and may continue to do so.

Xi is giving credit to CPC's resilience and dedication. Despite his enthusiasm, it is uncertain whether other countries will give the CPC a positive report card if it invites closer scrutiny of its methods during the past four decades.

China's successes came amid a US and Europe-led international system that allowed it to derive huge benefits from economic globalization. That environment is now being destabilized by upheavals in the global trade and financial systems fuelled partly by political developments in the Western democracies.

Trade and economic uncertainties have risen very quickly, and China is not yet a powerful enough economy to shape their course. The US and EU economies are three times bigger and have much more influence over global trade flows, financial institutions and investment flows than Beijing. They also have many more military and security allies.

Xi may have big plans for the next 30 years but the West will not be asleep at the wheel. President Donald Trump's trade and foreign policies have caused some strains with America's European allies, but they would come together in short order if they found causes for alarm at Beijing's ambitions.

## **XI'S LANDMARK VISION**

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After nearly two centuries of internal upheavals, defeats and humiliation, China deserves to stand tall again. That is the goal of Xi's program of national rejuvenation announced at the five-yearly CPC Congress in October 2017, when Xi was reappointed as China's paramount leader.

Xi is a modern, outward-looking and pragmatic leader who avoids rhetorical exaggerations. His speech at the Congress was a historically significant landmark because of the vision and directions he set for his mandate and the CPC. The United States and Europe may be forced to make difficult adjustments stemming from erosion of their global influence, which has not been challenged since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

India may also be forced to think again about its growing military and economic dependence on the US and question the Western values that underpin its democracy. The Indian economy continues to struggle even as Xi consolidates China's strengths and builds for a new economic and military surge forward. Xi is suggesting that each country including India should draw lessons from China to build governance based on indigenous values and constraints, rather than emulating any foreign model.

Xi, is a formidably capable heir to Mao Zedong both as a tactician and strategist. China is now well on the way to becoming an irresistible global Great Power, and Xi's policies could empower the CPC to rule longer than any administration of the past.

Like Mao, he is likely to run circles around Washington, especially now that it is led by Trump who seems to lack long-term strategic thought and is a hasty tactician. More importantly, the inward turn of America's electorate might continue after Trump's departure giving enough time for China to prudently reshape the world order closer to its image.

Confidently, Xi has put his neck on the line. Many domestic knives will be out if he cannot sustain inner party discipline to ensure the implementation of his domestic plans during his second term. He would also invite mockery from the US, Europe and other countries, which may try to thwart him anyway.

Western critics complain that Xi is setting the bases for his own authoritarian rule until 2030, thus breaking the CPC's internal practices limiting presidents to two terms. He can hardly be blamed when Trump and others are shattering decades-old democratic conventions in America, France, Britain, Germany, Spain, Russia and elsewhere.

There is no cause to doubt that Xi's intentions are pacific because peace and global prosperity are the best enabling factors for China's surge further forward. Mao restored the first slices of Chinese pride by defeating armies aided by the US and other nations, which he blamed for China's "century of humiliation" between 1839 and 1949.

He then enticed President Richard Nixon to visit Beijing in 1972 although the US had refused to recognize communist China's existence. Nixon gave Mao's China a veto-bearing seat in the UN Security Council and withdrew recognition from Taiwan as China's legitimate government. In a sense, Mao inflicted memorable foreign policy changes on the US, the superpower that had shaped the world since 1945.

In return, Nixon got much more trade with China but also turned it into a global dragon with bite, which Trump now says is bleeding Americans. Xi is preparing China to impose new changes by forcing Washington to share global leadership. If successful, historians might place him above Mao.

The main reasons for this mighty dragon's rise were a string of competent leaders in Beijing after Mao's death in 1976. They firmly imposed directions implemented by the entire CPC. Their disciplines, often criticized in liberal democracies, have brought China to the edge of standing tall as a credible rival of the US.

Xi is very different from Mao or China's Emperors who were always inward-looking and kept foreign influences out while conducting trade. Now the paramount leader is saying that China should go out to build a "global community of common destiny for all humankind".

This is a historical change for China, especially if its wealth and power are used to compete peacefully with the US. Still better if they bring good to people in developing countries without demanding subservience in return. That deserves encouragement, but liberal democracies should worry if Xi tries to impose China's CPC system as an alternative.

Because of economic successes, Xi wants to highlight China's governance as an example for most developing countries. The title of Xi's speech to the CPC Congress was, "Secure a

Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Those words summarize the central tenets he has set for the CPC and China. Seeking only to be “moderately prosperous” helps China to allay Western and Russian apprehensions about its growing economic clout in developing countries.

The reference to a New Era is very important because it signifies that after securing territorial control under Mao and starting economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, the CPC can now move forward rapidly to secure China’s prestige as a global power. Mao and Deng were enshrined as transformative leaders with their tenets recorded in the CPC’s constitution. Xi was similarly honoured with his “Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”.<sup>3</sup>

In the new era, China will lean into world affairs proactively to help shape the emerging world order. Xi’s thoughts do not necessarily contradict respect for universal democratic values, but he may seek changes reflecting “the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics”. The push for changes is already visible in Chinese negotiating positions in various United Nations negotiations.

Thus far, China had been very low key to “bide its time and hide its strength”. But Xi now insists that China should have self-confidence in its culture, development path, political system and theory. This assertiveness will mark China’s soft power push in coming years, partly through many Confucius Institutes in cities and university campuses around the globe.

The reference to “society in all respects” draws attention to the CPC’s focus on social harmony in line with the ideals always cherished by Chinese civilization. Remarkably for communists, the CPC is underlining historical continuity by tracing ancient thinkers like Confucius to the cultural ethos of Xi’s Thought. Thus, it underplays communism’s atheism and spotlights China as a beacon of ancestral secularity at a time when religion-based wars and intolerance are bleeding the world.<sup>4</sup>

Using Confucius as a spearhead of Chinese soft power is an astute tactic. It draws attention away from communism and opens a back door to enter the hearts and minds of anti-Trump Americans and all those in the West and elsewhere who are alarmed by intolerant nationalist populism in their democracies. It might make “socialism with Chinese characteristics” look like an alternative involving consultative democracy more suitable for developing countries than fractious Western-style liberal democracy.

The reference to “great success” suggests similar economic success for poor countries that adopt the Chinese model modified for their own needs. Thus, the West’s thought-

<sup>3</sup> RAND Center for Asia Pacific Policy; <https://www.rand.org/international/capp.html>

<sup>4</sup> 19th CPC National Congress; <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/19cpcnc/index.htm>

leadership would face formidable challenges since many developing countries have long grumbled about its inequities.

Xi will advance in two patient steps. China will become a moderately prosperous economy and society from 2020-2035, followed by 15 years to 2050 when it fully modernizes and assumes great power status.

Xi's speech confirms that Chinese socialism is no longer revolutionary. It now traces origins not just to Marx and Mao but to millennia-old indigenous principles that require rulers to place taking care of the people above anything else. Harmony must exist between heaven and earth and the heavens are surely smiling on China, judging from the opportunities that have fallen into Xi's lap because of disarray in the West after Trump's election as US president.

At the meeting of world political parties in Beijing, Xi underlined harmony among nations. Connecting the prospects and destinies of every nation closely together could "turn planet Earth into a harmonious family", he suggested. That included building a safe world free of fear, where countries did not seek security at the cost of others, since "threats facing other countries may be challenges to ourselves".

An important Chinese goal is to unite its 80 million-strong diasporas behind such thoughts. That is easier now because he has laid down a coherent long-term strategy with clear tactical markers for instilling pride in all Chinese. Apparently, Xi wants to demonstrate to any takers that the Chinese governance system takes better care of people and generates less inequality than the mostly unfettered capitalism of Western democracies. Acceptance of this assertion by developing countries could change the world as structured by the US and Europe after World War II.

### ***Xi and India's Modi***

Xi's new self-confidence represents a watershed for China and contrasts with the caution of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Taking a dig at the narrow-minded protectionism underlying Trump's "America first" policies, Xi has said that China "would not close its doors to the world". He promised to lower barriers for foreign investors, which might mean that foreign companies may get a more level playing field inside China. Getting equal treatment with Chinese firms would be a big gain.<sup>5</sup>

Xi's push to instil pride among Chinese expatriates scattered around the world is far superior to Delhi's confused outreach to India's diaspora. Indians abroad are divided into factions subservient to the main domestic political parties and mirror the relentless political warfare inside their home country. They do not have clear Indian success

<sup>5</sup> India's Passage to the Future; <https://www.morganstanley.com/Themes/india-insights-investment-outlook>



stories to look up to as do China's diasporas. There is very little inspiration to unify all Indian diaspora factions as an undivided expatriate lobby abroad for Modi's India.

For instance, Xi's continuing anti-corruption drive is a model compared to that of Modi in India. So far, Xi has punished 278,000 officials, including 440 at ministerial rank and many politburo members. Hardly any top-ranking minister, politician or bureaucrat has been severely punished in India, although corruption continues to grow as a cancer from top to bottom.

Messaging is also easier for Xi's administration because China is demonstrably successful. Since Mao's death in 1976, it has conquered extreme poverty and become a world-class innovator. McKinsey Global Institute reports that China has over 40 per cent of global e-commerce transactions, up from 1 per cent a decade ago and payments by phone are 11 times the transaction value of the US. It leads in sharing-economy technologies and incubates one-third of the world's 262 unicorn start-ups valued at over \$1 bn. It has the world's biggest bike-sharing and ride-sharing networks.

China is also a leader in technologies for e-commerce, anti-pollution, solar and wind energy, electric cars, high-speed trains, efficient airports and harbours, and wireless systems. It is an increasingly formidable military power, including stealth submarines and cyber warfare. The total fortune of 2,130 Chinese individuals equals the entire British economy, according to the Hurun Report's 2017 rich list.

India is far behind partly because of its disordered democracy, poorly-trained bureaucracy, snail-paced justice, and hobbled business and investment ecosystems. The Chinese model may have things to dislike, but it deserves study to see what should be borrowed and adapted.

Beijing's post-Mao solutions merit attention because there are many similarities among Indians and Chinese. That might mean lowering military tensions and increasing people-to-people exchanges in all spheres, especially modernization, poverty alleviation, urban development, transport and energy saving.

Deeper understanding is needed of how the 89-million strong CPC trains officials and administers disparate regions to bring transformations across-the-board. Its unity behind a leader's directions contrasts sharply with the venal back-stabbing of Indian political parties. Some may call Xi authoritarian, but his tough disciplines also make common sense in a country as vast and unruly as China.

Much depends on how Xi handles China's onward march. The risk of a Thucydides Trap persists. The US and its European allies could react badly to disruptions caused by a rising China, which they long treated as inscrutable, inward-looking and backward.

A US-China Cold War or limited naval skirmishes cannot be ruled out, particularly if Trump's nationalism is not an aberration but expresses a longer-term shift in US voter preferences.

Europeans are also buffeted by similar changes. Protectionists and nationalists who want to place "our own people first" are disrupting liberal democracy in Britain, France, Holland, Germany, Spain, Italy, Greece, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Poland and several other countries.

Worse, North Korea is threatening nuclear catastrophe and terrorists are plaguing the West as unending wars continue in the Middle East, Afghanistan, South East Asia, and North and sub-Saharan Africa. India's military tensions with Pakistan are unabated and military competition with China is intensifying.

This backdrop offers opportunities for China to promote itself as a model of political stability under the CPC. But managing the rise peaceably is a challenge for Xi and other world leaders.

Xi's three-and-a-half-hour speech to the CPC Congress did not ring alarms because he stayed focused on the "great rejuvenation" of the Chinese people. But he firmly intends to lead China to equality with the US if not economic and military superiority by 2050. That push could cause problems.

Some Chinese analysts think economic partnership with India is too risky because of its unpredictable internal politics. So, China might continue to manipulate Pakistan into being a Beijing satellite while keeping a grip on Myanmar and creeping into Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Delhi's responses should include a systematic policy of weaning Xi to closer economic ties and lesser military rivalry. Improved relations with India would deliver clear gains for Xi's legacy in China, which could outweigh his qualms about India's military and economic outreach to the US and Russia. Less apprehension about Delhi may also lead him to stop seeing Pakistan as a useful satellite from which to harass India if needed.

Xi is a master of both tactics and strategy. His first move after becoming president in 2012 was to assert discipline over CPC cadres to stop them behaving like lords of fiefs. October's CPC congress sealed his authority, and no one will dare to cross him for a while. Astutely, he has provided patriotic motivation including China's rejuvenation for CPC cadres to implement his clearly defined strategy.

Most of the world's poorer nations are not good at democracy, so Xi's ideas and China's example will look attractive. More so, if he succeeds in keeping CPC cadres on track, controls corruption and manages to strengthen Chinese businesses, including the private sector.

The biggest challenge for Xi, Modi and other world leaders is to prevent the trust required for peaceful relations from being disrupted by insufficient communication and transparency in their policies towards one another. It is also necessary not to overreact to Xi's ambitious policies since much could happen both inside and outside China over the coming 30 years to push his plans off track.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Uncertain foundations***

China tells impressive success stories, but its net private wealth was \$29 trillion in mid-2017 compared with over \$93 trillion in America, as indicated by separate estimates from the Federal Reserve and Credit Suisse. Xi has great ambitions but in terms of private wealth China is barely visible in America's rear mirror. That gap is not closing, according to debt data by the Bank for International Settlements.<sup>7</sup>

Despite such snap shots of wealth and debt data, Xi was right when he told the CPC Congress that China will now be "moving closer to center stage" in global relations. Hu Jintao's era of the "peaceful rise of China" has indeed paved pathways to Xi's "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".

China's economic footprint is increasing with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is now the world's largest trading nation but its access to ocean routes is limited because its ships must pass through straits bordered by Japan and Taiwan in the east and the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca in the West. China's naval expansion and island building in the South China Sea are attempts to reduce strategic vulnerabilities arising from geography, but its gains are already being balanced by Japan, India and the US.

The International Energy Agency estimates that China's oil import needs may grow to 80 per cent by 2035, up from 64 per cent in 2016. The BRI's flagship project is an economic corridor across Pakistan to Gwadar Port near Iran to diversify China's oil and gas supply routes away from the Malacca Strait and South China Sea.

Partly to secure other supply routes, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) recently opened its first overseas base in Djibouti near the strategic 12-mile-wide Mandeb Strait, which can be a choke point for sea lanes from the Mediterranean and Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

<sup>6</sup> India-China; <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/07/china-will-regret-indias-entry-into-the-shanghai-cooperation.html>

<sup>7</sup> Global Wealth Report; <https://www.credit-suisse.com/corporate/en/research/research-institute/global-wealth-report.html>

China's current naval expansion is a remarkable achievement. The last time China was a great naval power was in the 15th century when Admiral Zheng He's fleets navigated across the Indian Ocean visiting India, the Horn of Africa and Arabia. By the 16th century, China became an isolationist power and its navy had to wait for centuries to gain prominence again. Its blue water fleets began their recovery only 30 years ago.

But geography still stands in China's way. The chokepoints for its trade routes do raise risks, as do geopolitics, for achieving Xi's ambitions for China's rise through to 2050.

Delhi has already voiced sharp apprehension about the economic corridor in Pakistan but is unlikely to interfere with China's commercial and non-military expansion in the Indian Ocean. It is warily watching China's inroads in Sri Lanka, especially after Colombo formally handed over the \$1.3 billion Hambantota port for a 99-year lease to China in December 2017 because of unpaid debts to Chinese leaders. That period is as long as China's 19th-century lease of Hong Kong to Britain but not as restrictive and could be worthwhile.

Colombo gave the state-controlled China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPH) a 70 per cent stake in a joint venture with the state-run Sri Lanka Ports Authority. CMPH is a renowned port operator and could make Hambantota profitable as a hub for China's burgeoning trade but critics worry that Sri Lanka has lost control over its only world class harbour for a century. A worried Delhi has begun talks to operate an airport near the port and economic zone to strengthen its presence in Sri Lanka.

Chinese investments, including BRI, could greatly improve prosperity and quality of life for everyone in South and South-East Asia through high-speed trains and faster overland trade routes across Asia to Europe. But unease is evident. Some analysts see BRI projects as a backdoor for Chinese lenders to gain control of infrastructure when poor developing countries are unable to repay debts. Even Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar, which tend to favour Beijing, earlier cancelled or slowed down \$20 billion worth of hydroelectricity projects planned by Chinese companies (but other projects were agreed on improved terms).

Even if governments believe Xi's positive intentions and offer maximal cooperation, financing the construction of so much BRI infrastructure may be challenging partly because of China's domestic debt problems.<sup>8</sup>

Some economists offer calculations to show that the domestic debt problems are not as potentially risky as doubters contend. Still, stability depends on Xi's ability to discipline the CPC behind his visions for China's domestic economy and harmonious global rise during the next five years, and several decades afterwards.

<sup>8</sup> Belt and Road Initiative; <http://english.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/>

Although China has a one-party system, Xi's domestic manipulations look like those of a leader in a democracy trying to keep his grip on the ruling party to ensure the implementation of his agenda. His speech to the CPC Congress was thoughtful and inspired confidence in his determination to manage China's rise without upsetting the apple cart of the post-World War II global order led by the US and EU.

But politics and history have ways of springing surprises and 32 years is a long time to look ahead in the global crystal ball. Xi expressed a "China dream" marked by "comprehensive national power", which would be developed quickly to take advantage of a "period of strategic opportunity".

Realizing that dream depends as much on his domestic political skills as on foreign powers not seeing enough causes for apprehension to obstruct the strategic opportunity. ■

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