

Literature Review: The Views of Chinese and International Scholars on the Causes of the US-China Trade War

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Abstract

This study collected articles (2018-2021) on the US-China trade war, including 71 in the WOS database and 57 in the CNKI database (originating from China), and analyzed the viewpoints of international and Chinese scholars on the causes of the US-China trade war. The results show that both international and Chinese scholars have basically the same views when analyzing and considering the problems. They both believe that the trade deficit between the US and China is the direct cause of the trade war, while US trade protectionism and the "America First" mentality are the main reasons. They also agree that competition for global economic leadership between the two countries is the main root of the trade war. However, the difference between them is that international scholars generally have broader academic horizons, more objective and fair expressions, and more critical traditions. They tend to take a neutral position in analyzing the causes of the trade war. They point out not only the causes and consequences of the trade war, but also possible misjudgments by the United States. Chinese scholars, on the other hand, have relatively narrower academic horizons, their views are often nationalistic, and their narratives are more intense and emotional.

Keywords

US-China Trade War, Literature Review, Scholars, US-China Trade War Dispute

1. Introduction

In recent years, the deterioration of relations between the United States and China has attracted the attention of most countries in the world. The former is a recognized superpower, while the latter is undoubtedly an economic giant with growing comprehensive strength (Tzogopoulos, 2019). With the outbreak COVID-19 of global economic and political turmoil, increasing competition between major powers, and the failure of institutions designed to promote international cooperation, the contradictions between the two countries have greatly increased.

After World War II, US preeminence in the world order was reinforced by interrelated norms, rules, institutions, and its ability to provide global public goods. However, with the relative improvement of comprehensive national strength, China has shaped the order with a more confident stance through the narrative of "peaceful rise" and the "Chinese dream" (Kahl & Berengaut, 2020). The rivalry between the two countries has led to talk of a "new Cold War" in the international relations literature. Some argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown a "moment of realignment" (Blackwill & Wright, 2020; Campbell & Rush, 2020). However, it has also been pointed out that the epidemic will only accelerate, not change, the fundamental direction of international history (Haass, 2020; Michael & Medeiros, 2020). It is undeniable that the epidemic will be a turning point in the restructuring of the international system and power structure (Basu, 2020; Kahl & Berengaut, 2020).

If we look back at the evolution of US-China relations, we will see that relations between the two countries began to deteriorate after President Obama proposed the "Pivot to Asia" strategy against China. In 2018, the outbreak of the US-China trade war accelerated the deterioration of relations between the two countries. The economic and trade relations between the two countries not only affect the economy and livelihood of people on both sides, but also the structure of the world. On March 22, 2018, US President Trump signed a presidential memorandum based on the findings of the "Section 301 investigation," which stated that "China's theft of US intellectual property and trade secrets" imposed extensive tariffs on goods imported from China and prevented Chinese companies from investing and doing business in the United States to force China to change its "unfair trade practices". To which China responded in return. Since then, the trade war between the two countries began and continues to this day. During this time, scholars have conducted numerous studies on the US-China trade war and produced a number of research findings. These include the causes of the trade war between the US and China, the effects of the trade war and the countermeasures to settle the trade war, etc. Among these findings, Chinese and international scholars have both the same and different views in analyzing the causes of the US-China trade war. In order to explore the similarities and differences of these viewpoints and analyze the differences in the academic visions of Chinese and international scholars reflected in these viewpoints, this study analyzes the relevant literature.

2. Method

The authors used "trade war" + "cause", "US-China trade war" + "reason", "US-China trade dispute" as keywords and searched the Web of Science database (WOS) and the CNKI database (in China) for relevant articles (2018-2021). After excluding irrelevant papers, there are 71 papers in WOS and 57 articles in CNKI. Based on these papers, the authors sort and summarize the views of scholars at home and abroad. To facilitate the distinction between the opinions of different groups, we refer to the opinions published in domestic journals in China as the opinions of Chinese scholars and the opinions published in journals outside China as the opinions of international scholars.

3. Results

After reading, compiling, and analyzing the literature, scholars' views on the causes of the US-China trade war can essentially be traced to the following four dimensions.

3.1. The US-China Trade Deficit Is the Direct Cause of the US-China Trade War

International scholars widely agree that China's rise has benefited from the global order that the United States has created since World War II. Thus, China must become a good model for the global economy, not just a beneficiary. Therefore, some international scholars believe that the trade deficit between the United States and China caused by China's non-compliance with international trade rules and China's trade protection policies are the direct causes of the trade war (Lawrence, 2018; Malawer, 2018; Fatma & Bharti, 2019; Zhao, 2019b). They explained that China had a bilateral trade surplus with the United States after joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), but no mutually beneficial access to the Chinese market for the United States and other countries. Against this backdrop, the United States hopes to warn and pressure China to reciprocate more in the future through a trade war. In addition, some scholars believe that China's trade protection policies, especially the "Made in China 2025" plan, not only cause the trade deficit between the United States and China but also pose a great threat to the global trading system (Fatma & Bharti, 2019; Lampton, 2017; Lawrence, 2018; Malawer, 2018; Xing, 2018; Zhao, 2019b). Which policies include subsidizing favored Chinese industries and requiring foreign companies to transfer technology as a condition for entering the Chinese market.

Some scholars, however, are skeptical about the reasons for the trade war instigated by the United States. They questioned that the large trade deficit between the two countries and the resulting decline in US output are just a pretext (Guo et al., 2018; Stiglitz, 2018). For example, Nobel Laureate economist Joseph E. Stiglitz stated that the high US trade deficit and shrinking industry are the result of the combined effects of macroeconomic, domestic investment, and savings levels, not trade with China (Stiglitz, 2018). The other scholars explained that China's industrial subsidy policies, while widespread, do not have a significant impact on trade flows as de facto "import tariffs." And as for forced technology transfer, the existing cases or studies cannot prove whether technology transfer is forced or a natural result of economic cooperation or coordination. In light of this, the United States does not have enough evidence to charge forced technology transfer or technology theft, and there is no reason to start a trade war over this allegation (Guo et al., 2018).

Cameron College scholars Abdulhamid Sukar and Said Ahmed pointed out that the statistical method of the origin principle and re-export trade overestimates the US-China trade deficit in goods. Therefore, the Trump administration's trade strategy to address the bilateral trade deficit with China is inconsistent with the underlying problems of the overall trade deficit and the underlying macroeconomic conditions (Sukar & Ahmed, 2019). Some scholars believe that imposing high tariffs to rebalance trade and revive production reflects, to some extent, Trump's misunderstanding that trade is a zero-sum game (Lawrence, 2018; Malawer, 2020). In addition, some scholars have noted that the US trade war, citing national security, could easily tempt other WTO members to misunderstand trade and mimic retaliation, which would increase countries' trade barriers and reinforce unilateralism and disregard for and non-compliance with WTO rules (Albertoni & Wise, 2020; Lawrence, 2018). Regarding the impact of the US trade war with China, Australian scholar Kerry Liu stated that it is impossible for China to make significant concessions in this trade war because the "Made in China 2025" is very important for the sustainable development of China's economy and China's transition to an advanced, technology-driven economy (Liu, 2018b).

On the issue of the US-China trade deficit, most Chinese scholars bluntly stated that the error in the calculation method of the US trade deficit was the direct cause of the trade war (Chen, 2018; He, 2018; Tan et al., 2018; Yu & Zhao, 2018). They rarely addressed the question of whether China was violating international trade rules or whether China was taking excessive trade defense measures. Specifically, they argue that the US-China trade deficit data are exaggerated. The reasons are as follows: 1) The US has a deficit in goods trade with China, while China has a deficit in services trade with the US. The reason for this lies in the peculiarities of their respective industrial structures and the international division of labor. 2) The calculation method is wrong. Current statistical methods in the United States have significantly overestimated the actual size of the trade deficit between China and the United States. 3) Even if there is a trade deficit, it is due to the strict restrictions imposed by the US government on the export of high-tech products to China. Moreover, some Chinese scholars pointed out that Trump's direct intention is to blackmail interests (Long, 2018; Wu, 2019; Xu, 2018). They stated that the huge budget deficit accumulated over the years and the slowdown of the US economic growth have made the US government under Trump even more worried. In this situation, increasing revenue and reducing spending through trade with China have become the Trump administration's first choice to ensure the continued existence of the United States (Long, 2018; Wu, 2019; Xu, 2018).

Comparing the views of international scholars and Chinese scholars, we find that they basically agree that the trade deficit between the US and China is the direct cause of the US-China trade war. The difference is that international scholars have objectively pointed out the responsibilities and obligations that China should assume after joining the WTO. In addition, some international scholars have questioned US rhetoric when analyzing the huge trade deficit claimed by the United States. However, most Chinese scholars adopt a nationalist stance and tend to make a blanket denial of the so-called US trade deficit, rather than providing a practical and convincing explanation for the US accusation that China's protectionist policies are causing the trade deficit.

3.2. US Trade Protectionism Is the Main Reason for the US-China Trade War

Most international scholars believe that US trade protectionism and the "America First" mentality are the main reasons for the trade war (Fatma & Bharti, 2019; Fred, 2018; Stiglitz, 2018; Sukar & Ahmed, 2019; Urata, 2020). Fred Bergsten said that after his election, Trump repeatedly attacked the international economic system and emphasized gaining trade advantages through national strength, which is typical trade protectionist thinking (Fred, 2018). Indian scholar Ayesha Fatma stated that the United States is not a victim of the trade war or far from being portrayed as a victim by it. According to him, the United States has put forward three false assumptions from the victim perspective: first, the United States believes that it is providing excessive global public services with enormous expenditures; second, US military strength supports the enforcement of its trade and dollar hegemony; third, the United States must weigh the trade-offs between domestic and international activities, believing that the resources devoted to the latter can be easily used domestically for the goal of increasing prosperity (Fatma & Bharti, 2019).

Scholar Stiglitz criticized Trump's protectionism that the "America First" ideology reveals one of the weaknesses of "capitalism and politics with American characteristics": Shortsightedness. Trump's protectionist policies will encourage countries around the world to form new alliances, abandon old ones and help China open up new avenues of cooperation, he said. He also said that protectionism hurts American workers more than China because China has changed from an export-oriented economy to a domestic market-oriented economy (Stiglitz, 2018).

Chinese scholars have criticized US protectionist policies even more harshly. They claim that Trump wrongly attributes the decline of the United States to the situation that many existing international organizations and allies take advantage of the United States. This concept has led him to oppose the trend of economic globalization with "economic nationalism" and multilateralism with protectionism (He, 2018; Huang, 2018; Wu, 2019; Xu, 2018). Some of these scholars emphasized that "economic nationalism" is used by the current US administration as a fundamental method to correct the problems caused by US foreign economic and security policies and globalization in recent decades, which have led not only to the US-China trade war but also to the US-EU trade war (Tan et al., 2018; Wu, 2019; Xu, 2018). In addition, some have pointed out that the bitter political game between the two parties in the United States is also one of the reasons for the trade war (Li, 2018a; Tan et al., 2018; Wu, 2019; Xu, 2018). In order to win the next general election, they pointed out that Trump hopes to restrict trade between China and the United States and develop related industries to create more job opportunities, and that he wants to win the support of middle- and lower-level voters. They also said that although the two parties have different opinions on many aspects, they can often reach a high level of consensus and resonance on the China issue because opposition to China is a common means of political competition between the two parties.

Looking at the main cause that led to the US-China trade war, international and Chinese scholars essentially agree that Trump's trade protectionism is the main reason for the trade war. The difference is that Chinese scholars have elevated Trump's trade protectionism to the level of "economic nationalism" and sharply criticize this economic nationalism for leading not only to the US-China trade war but also to the trade war US-EU. International scholars, on the other hand, take a relatively neutral position and emphasize that Trump's trade protectionism has also done great harm to the United States itself.

3.3. Competition for Global Economic Leadership Is at the Root of the US-China Trade War

The view that competition for economic leadership in the world is the root cause of the US-China trade war is supported by many international and Chinese scholars (Allison, 2018; Fred, 2018; Li, 2018a; Xing, 2018; Zhao, 2019a). The most conclusive viewpoint comes from Fred Bergsten, who said that the core of the US-China trade dispute is a long-term systemic competition for economic leadership in the world, encompassing politics, economics, ideology, value orientation, security domain, and comprehensive national strength (Fred, 2018). Specifically, China believes that the United States is delaying its rise, and the United States believes that China will challenge its global dominance in all areas. From the US perspective, China is a challenger that disrupts the existing order (Basu, 2020; Blackwill & Wright, 2020; Kahl & Berengaut, 2020). Since the end of the Cold War, the world's major countries have submitted to the international order led by the United States. However, after 2000, with the rapid development of China's economy and the continuous improvement of its international status, China sought to completely destroy the United States' allies and eventually replace the United States as the most important power in Asia and the world leader in science and technology (Blackwill & Wright, 2020; Zhao, 2019b). Beijing's long-term efforts are gaining ground as Beijing's influence continues to grow and Washington weakens internationally. Regardless of objective reality, Beijing's actions suggest that it likely believes it is playing a winning role (Blackwill & Wright, 2020; Zhao, 2019b).

Scholar Allison stated that China and the United States inevitably fall into the Thucydides Trap. He explained that unless Xi Jinping's ambitions to "rejuvenate China" fail, China will continue to challenge the United States for its accustomed top position. As well as, Americans will not be able to tolerate China's rise unless the United States redefines itself to accept what is not "first" (Allison, 2018). Scholar Ross noted that the United States and China are undergoing power transitions. The continued development of power transitions will certainly lead to more power competition (Ross, 2020). As Chinese President Xi Jinping expects China to take an active leadership role in global politics, the Belt and Road Economic Belt and the Asian Investment Bank have sought to reduce the international influence of the United States, prompting the latter to resolutely maintain its global dominance (Bhattacharya, 2019; Zhao, 2019a).

According to scholars, the following actions by China are considered a challenge to US global leadership: 1) China's counterattack in the US-China trade war has drawn the ire of the United States. This is because the United States had originally assumed that China would soon back down, but unexpectedly China retaliated in equal measure (Fatma & Bharti, 2019; Zhao, 2019b). 2) China's proposed "Made in China 2025" plan has put tremendous pressure on the United States, leading the US to believe that China is challenging its dominance in the high-tech sector. Therefore, it is necessary to reduce China's global influence to maintain the technological advantages of the United States (Chen et al., 2020; Zhao, 2019b). 3) China's ability to solve the crisis makes the United States nervous. The financial crisis triggered by the United States has spread across the world since 2009, affecting many countries. However, China has successfully responded to this crisis with the Chinese model, which made the United States nervous (Zhao, 2019b). It is worth noting that in the face of US nervousness, the Chinese government has subsequently taken a series of measures to reduce tensions between the two sides, such as announcing a series of penalties for intellectual property violations and formulating a plan to replace the "Made in China 2025"; even the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Congress has considered a draft law prohibiting the government from using administrative means to force the transfer of foreign technology to domestic enterprises (Chen et al., 2020). But unfortunately, the United States has not ended its trade war with China.

As for Chinese scholars' views on the competition for global economic leadership between China and the United States, they mainly focus on the following two points. First, they believe that the US is aimed at containing China's development. They explain that China's rise has gradually narrowed the power gap between China and the United States in various fields, which has caused obvious pressure, fear and hostility in the United States, especially the development of China's high-tech industry, making the United States fear that China will replace its global hegemony (Huang, 2018; Liu, 2018a; Tan et al., 2018; Xu, 2018; Yu & Zhao, 2018). Long Guoqiang said that the areas where the United States imposes tariffs mainly target the high-tech areas included in "Made in China 2025," reflecting the United States' intention to slow down China's technological catchup process (Long, 2018). The second point is that the trade war represents US suppression of the Chinese development model. Chen (2018) pointed out that in the longer term, the US trade war is a struggle between the Chinese model and the Washington model, which are competing for dominance in the world economy and the right to formulate the rules of the game of economic globalization (Chen, 2018). In particular, the United States' vigilance and concern that other countries will follow the Chinese model is based on the fact that the Chinese model has relative advantages in dealing with the financial crisis and some important international affairs. Therefore, the United States wants to stigmatize the Chinese development model through the war of opinions triggered by the trade war (Chen, 2018; Long, 2018).

Moreover, almost all scholars have pointed out that the Trump administration's real motivation for the US-China trade war is to preserve US hegemony (Chen, 2018; Li, 2018a, 2018b; Long, 2018; Tan et al., 2018; Wu, 2019; Xu, 2018; Yu & Zhao, 2018; Zong, 2019). Li Qingsi, deputy director of the Center for American Studies at Renmin College of China, pointed out that "Washington's stance on "Made in China 2025" and ZTE's suspension of shipments and heavy fines show that the trade war with China is not a simple trade issue, but a strategic competition for the future development of the two countries based on geographic competition. He stressed that containing China's development and strengthening US hegemony are the fundamental goals of the United States in instigating a trade war (Li, 2018a). According to Tan Xiaofen of the Central College of Finance and Economics, the United States instigated a trade war because China's economic strength and international influence have weakened the status of the United States as the world hegemon (Tan et al., 2018).

The issue of US hegemony in the trade war has also attracted the attention of international scholars. For example, Mearsheimer said that some Americans attributed the failure of the United States' pursuit of hegemony in the post-Cold War era to the rapid development of other countries, including China. This notion led the United States to establish anti-Chinese economic nationalism and populism, which ultimately led to Sino-American relations undergoing the greatest transformation in 50 years (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Overall, international and Chinese scholars agree that competition for economic leadership in the world is the root cause of the US-China trade war. The difference is that international scholars have analyzed the urgency of the current situation of competition between China and the United States for the United States from the perspective of observers, and have also objectively analyzed China's competitive advantage in economic leadership in the world and the Chinese government's compromise measures. Chinese scholars, on the other hand, have strongly condemned the hegemonic behavior of the United States from the perspective of victims and emphasized that the trade war is a typical form of containment and oppression. These views reflect a strong nationalist sentiment and lack a rational and objective perspective. They simply see the United States as the hegemon of the international order and ignore the fact that China's economy has continuously benefited from this so-called hegemonic order.

3.4. Ideological Competition Is the Underlying Reason for the US-China Trade War

Some international scholars pointed out that ideological competition is the deepest reason for the United States to start a trade war with China (Fred, 2018; Strasbourg, 2019; Zhao, 2019b). They explained that the reason why the United States originally agreed to China's accession to the WTO was so that business could bring in American liberal and democratic values to change China's political system. However, it appears that the United States has failed in its attempts to change China's ideology through economic integration. Therefore, the United States has engaged in a trade war with China to promote isolation.

The Strasbourg study notes that there are two trends that give ideological color to security and economic conflicts in US-China relations. First, China's restoration of authoritarianism and its state-directed industrial policies have undone Western optimism that China will eventually achieve political and economic liberalization after 40 years of global participation and integration. Second, Hungary, Belarus, Brazil, and the Philippines have elected some unfree leaders, raising concerns about the collapse and crisis of the democratic world. These parallel developments have heightened concerns in the United States and Europe that China's example and influence are strengthening the power of global authoritarianism (Strasbourg, 2019).

In the course of discussing ideological competition to wage the trade wars, scholars have cited the views of the US government and some officials on ideological competition. For example, the 2018 US National Defense Strategy report states, China and Russia hope to shape a world that suits their dictatorship... (US Government, 2018). Kiron Skinner, director of policy planning at the US State Department, said, "Competing with China is a real struggle between different civilizations and different ideologies" (Weiss, 2020). US Congressman Mike Gallaher urged the United States to relearn the art of ideological warfare. He stated that the United States can only win this contest by challenging the fundamental legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and thereby ensuring the survival of a free, open, and prosperous world (Gallagher, 2019). These views clearly show that the US government attaches great importance to ideological conflicts with China and deliberately provokes ideological competition.

Some scholars disagree with the views of the US government. For example, Suisheng Zhao stated that although the United States has reasons to prevent ideological competition in China, there is little evidence that the Chinese Communist Party is pursuing a deliberate strategy to export autocracy and undermine democracy. because most dictatorships lack an ideology of expansion and tend to resist the erosion of Western democratic ideology. In particular, for the Chinese Communist Party, it is much more important to focus on maintaining authoritarian rule at home than spreading authoritarian ideas abroad (Zhao, 2019b). However, scholar Friedberg disagreed. He explained that although China's current rulers do not promote their repressive policies and a quasi-market economy, the richer they become, the more their model would encourage and strengthen other potential dictatorships to follow suit. At the same time, it is possible to weaken the institutions of young and developing democracies (Friedberg, 2018).

In the field of ideological competition, only one Chinese scholar has clearly mentioned that the United States expects China to integrate into the world economy through reform and opening up, carry out economic liberalization, and thereby achieve political democratization. However, the reality of China's development has entrenched the authoritarian system, which deeply disappoints hopeful American policymakers (Li, 2018b). This view appeared only once in 57 Chinese papers, suggesting that most Chinese scholars do not believe that ideological differences are the cause of the trade conflict between the two countries. The reason could be that China is primarily a country where the spirit of pragmatism is paramount. People usually pay more attention to practical and economic factors and rarely think about competition on an ideological level. Second, China is a secular country, and in its thousands of years of history, the coexistence of different religions and ethnic groups has shaped the relatively tolerant values of the Chinese people. This has led to a widespread belief in China that ideological differences among people are a general and universal phenomenon that is not sufficient to affect economic exchanges between the two countries.

There are significant differences between Chinese and international scholars in analyzing the deepest causes of the trade war. Some foreign scholars have focused on this cause and discussed it extensively, while Chinese scholars have hardly mentioned it. This difference shows that there are differences in depth of thinking and academic vision between them. Chinese scholars tend to pay more attention to the superficial and current influencing factors such as the US trade deficit, US trade protectionism and the psychology of hegemonism, etc., while the academic vision of international scholars focuses not only on the present and current but also on the underlying factors.

4. Conclusion

Scholars' opinions show that both Chinese and international scholars have basically the same angles in analyzing and considering problems. For example, they all agree that the trade deficit between the US and China is the direct cause of the trade war, while US trade protectionism and the "America First" mentality are the main reasons for the US trade war. They also agree that the competition for global economic leadership between the United States and China is the root cause of the US trade war. However, there are significant differences between international and Chinese scientists in terms of the specific analysis process and methods. International scholars tend to have a broader and deeper academic vision, which make their expressions are more objective and fair, and have a critical tradition. They tend to take a neutral position to analyze the causes of the US trade war and point out not only the causes and consequences of the trade war, but also the possible mistakes of the United States. For example, in analyzing the direct causes of the trade war, international scholars generally believe that China's non-compliance with international trade rules and China's trade defense measures caused the United States' trade deficit and that the combination of these factors led the United States to start a trade war with China. At the same time, they also questioned whether the US trade deficit may not be as large as the US claims, and they also condemned US hegemony.

Compared to international scholars, Chinese scholars have a relatively narrow and superficial academic vision, which often makes their views nationalistic and their narratives more intense and emotional. Most of them only use hostile psychology to analyze the motives of the United States from the perspective of the victims, instead of looking at the cause of this contradiction between the two countries from an objective and fair perspective. In addition, it is worth noting that they are also critical, but this criticism is usually directed against other people (or countries) and not against themselves. For example, most of them only emphasize that the US started the trade war based on wrong statistical methods and hegemonic psychology, while ignoring or obscuring some questions that should be answered positively: for example, are the US accusations against China true? This includes, first and foremost, whether China has a problem with not complying with international trade rules (especially whether China should open up its promised economic fields)? And whether there is excessive trade protection in China (especially whether there is a phenomenon of forced technology transfer)?

Second, the difference in the academic vision of Chinese and foreign scholars is also reflected in the depth of thinking. International scholars can often think about the causes of things in a broader context, while Chinese scholars tend to focus only on the current influencing factors. For example, international scholars have analyzed deep-seated ideological factors, emphasizing that the United States had expected China's economic development to lead to political democratization, and that now disappointment with this outcome is the deepest reason for the United States to wage a trade war against China. However, Chinese scholars rarely mention this factor or generally ignore it.

The results of this study show that most Chinese scholars have almost the same perspectives as international scholars in considering and analyzing the problems related to the causes of the US-China trade war. However, their narrative logic is usually easily influenced by nationalist narratives, causing them to fall into victim logic and lose an objective and fair position. This may be a common phenomenon among Chinese scholars.

In view of this, we suggest that Chinese scholars should adopt a rational attitude to study the research objects instead of paying too much attention to their ethnic identity, as academic research should not be subordinated to value judgments and cannot be an instrument for moral preaching and political enlightenment, but should maintain a calm, neutral and profound attitude.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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