

From *East Sea / South China Sea* to *Southeast Asia Sea*? The Geopolitics of Marine Toponyms

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South China Sea, a dominant toponym in English, generally refers to the marginal part of the Pacific Ocean which encompasses the area from the Malacca Straits to the Formosa (Taiwan) Strait; an area covering around 3,500,000 square kilometers. The sea is surrounded by China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines and Taiwan, and it is believed to contain huge oil and gas reserves beneath its seabed, in addition to the fact that one-third of the world's shipping transits through its waters. The marine toponym *South China Sea* resulted from the early European interest in the waters as a route from Europe and South Asia to China for trading purposes. It bore no implication of territorial sovereignty in the very beginning, but was simply a geographical reference for passage or nearby locations, adopted for the convenience of European maritime sailors and marine cartographers, just as other marine toponyms such as *Indian Ocean* or *Sea of Japan* were. Nevertheless, South China Sea is not the only marine toponym for the sea. Since the 15th century the Chinese classics have also named the said waters the *Sea of Jiaozhi* (*Jiaozho Yang* 交趾洋), an ancient name for Vietnam, and it was also known as the *Champa Sea* or *Sea of Cham*, after the maritime kingdom of Champa that flourished between the 7th and 16th centuries. Both names reveal no implication of territorial sovereignty, but rather are geographical references, much like the toponym of their counterpart, the *South China Sea*. Since the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea adopted the concept of the 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in 1982, the naming of marine waters by states has gradually become a quasi-territorial issue. A marine toponym corresponding to a landed geographical name, especially after name of a state, is now less commonly treated as a geographical reference, but often is viewed as a signal of state sovereignty. This may trigger nationalistic sentiment if the naming is interpreted as reflecting historical claims to hegemony over the sea. For instance,

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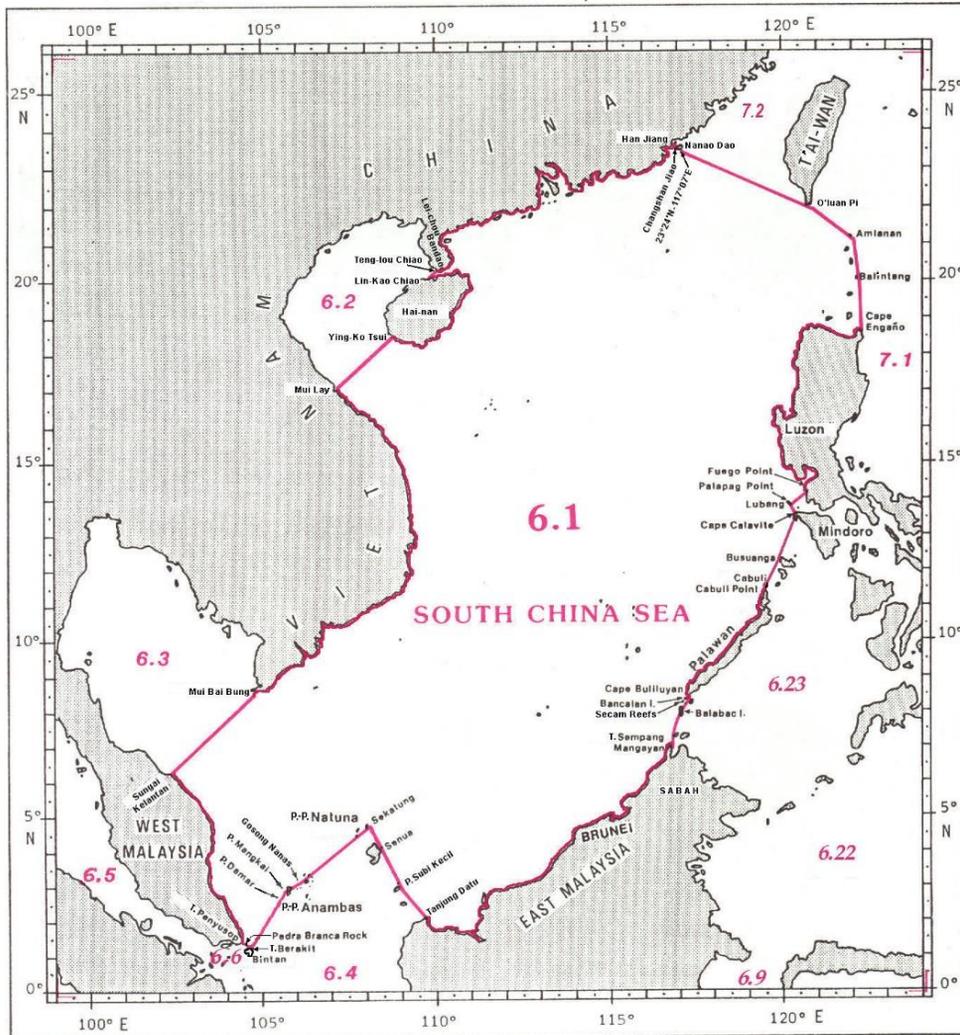
Vietnam would prefer the part of the South China Sea closest to its territory to bear the name *East Sea (Biển Đông)*, whereas that part of sea within Philippine territorial waters is often called the *Luzon Sea (Dagat Luzon)* by the Philippines. The conflict over naming came to a head in 2012 when President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines mandated that all government agencies use the name *West Philippine Sea* for those parts of the *South China Sea* within the Philippines' EEZ. In considering the inherent dilemma of naming conflicts and their implications for marine territorial sovereignty, this paper examines a case of proposed naming based on the contemporary regional label, *Southeast Asia Sea*, to shed light on how a shared, multi-party and localized naming practice works.

Keywords: toponym, South China Sea, Southeast Asia, Southeast Asia Sea

1. Introduction

South China Sea, a commonly used toponym in English, generally refers to the marginal part of the Pacific Ocean which encompasses the area from the Malacca Straits to the Formosa (Taiwan) Strait (Figure 1). Its area covers around 3,500,000 square kilometers. The sea is surrounded by China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan, and it is believed to contain huge oil and gas reserves beneath its seabed, in addition to the fact that one-third of the world's shipping transits through its waters. The marine toponym *South China Sea* resulted from the early European interest in the waters as a route from Europe and South Asia to China for trading purposes. It bore no implication of territorial sovereignty in the very beginning, but was simply a geographical reference for passage or nearby locations, adopted for the convenience of European maritime sailors and marine cartographers, just as other marine toponyms such as *Indian Ocean* or *Sea of Japan* were. By using *South China Sea* as an example, this paper discusses naming practices in terms of the transition from geographical references to names having territorial implications. In considering the inherent dilemma of naming conflicts and their implications for marine territorial sovereignty, the paper examines a proposed naming after the contemporary regional identity, *Southeast Asia Sea*, to shed light on how shared, multi-party and localized naming works, in practice.

Figure 1. The Marine Region of the *South China Sea* according to the International Hydrographic Organization, 2002



2. Sea names of cardinal orientation

There are many examples of sea names purely referring to cardinal directions. For instance, in East Asia we have *Biển Đông* in Vietnamese, *Donghae* (동해) in Korean and *Dōnghǎi* (东海) in Chinese. They all translate to *East Sea* in English, and all of them refer to the water body east of Vietnam, Korea, and China, respectively. *Biển Đông* refers to

Figure 2. Petrus Plancius' cartography Maluku islands (Insulae Moluccae) from 1592, showing the China Sea (Sinensis Oceanus) covering what is today the southwestern Pacific Ocean



the sea encircled by Vietnam, East Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and South China. Nowadays it is called the *South China Sea* by most cartographers. *Donghae* refers to the sea between Korea and Japan, and it is also known as the *Sea of Japan*. *Dōnghai* refers to the sea surrounded by East China, Taiwan and the Ryukyu islands and Kyushu of Japan.

The sea names describing cardinal orientation usually take a land mass as the basis for all cardinal directions, and the majority of such naming is endonymic in nature. Nevertheless, there are a few cases where the names are exonyms, and could be the result of the addition of a territorial toponym to a cardinal direction. For instance, *South China Sea* is a combination of the cardinal direction “South” and a territorial toponym, “China”. The word “South” was contributed by people living north of the sea, mainly the Chinese, whereas the “China” part was the contribution of those who intended to

sail to Cathay (Figure 2). As a matter of fact, the body of water being given the English name *South China Sea* resulted from the early Europeans' interest in the sea as a passage from Europe to China via South Asia for the trading of silk and porcelain. It was first called the *China Sea* (*Mar da China*) by Portuguese sailors in the 16th century, and later the South China Sea in order to differentiate it from other water bodies nearby China (Tønnesson 2005: 204-205).¹

3. Sea names implying destination

If the sea names *Mar da China* or *South China Sea* are significant due to their implication of a destination, the body of water nowadays known as the *South China Sea* also had other names connoting destinations long before the more recent coinage came to dominate. *Lingwai Daida* (嶺外代答) or the *Gazetteer beyond the Ridge* (Figure 3), which was compiled during the Southern Song Dynasty in China in the 12th century, mentioned the sea name “Sea of Jiaozhi” (交趾洋/交趾洋). Jiaozhi is an ancient name for Vietnam given by the Chinese to the territory as an imperial district name after the Han Empire of China annexed the Red River Delta into its territory. *Sea of Jiaozhi* later appeared in *Zhenla Fengtuji* (真臘風土記) or the *Geography of Chenla (Cambodia)*, compiled during the period of the Mongol Empire in the late 13th century (Figure 4), in *Dong Xi Yang Kao* (東西洋考) or the *Investigation of Eastern and Western Oceans*, created during the Ming Dynasty in China in the early 17th century, and in *Haiguo Tuzhi* (海國圖志) or the *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms*, which dated from the Qing Empire in 19th century China. The name itself was mostly employed to refer to the sea route to Vietnam.

Another ancient sea name with destination implication for the same water body is the *Champa Sea* or *Sea of Cham*, taking its name from the maritime kingdom of Champa that flourished in what is today central and southern Vietnam prior to the

¹ When it came to the naming of oceans, in 16th-century Europe, they were typically defined as the waters adjacent to a given piece of terrestrial territory, e.g., the Britannic Ocean, Germanic Ocean, and Hispanic Ocean. This idea gradually evolved into a basin-centered view of the oceans in the 19th century, with the equator as the dividing line used by most cartographers (Lewis 2010: 52).

Figure 3. Gazetteer beyond the Ridge

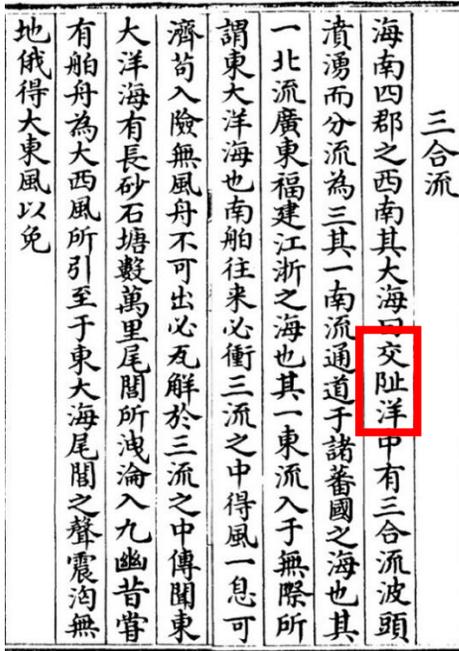
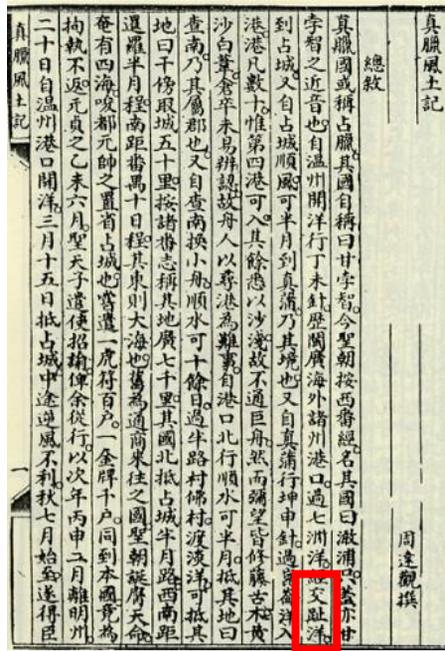


Figure 4. Geography of Chenla (Cambodia)



16th century. From the 7th to the 10th centuries, Champa was one of the major entrepôts on the so-called Silk Road of the Sea between East Asia and South Asia. *Sea of Champa* therefore served as a geographical marker for the route to Champa.²

Nevertheless, all the ancient sea names discussed above, be it *South Sea*, *Sea of Jiaozi*, or the *Champa Sea*, merely refer to part of the water body that makes up today's *South China Sea*, since the naming was carried out and the named used before the advent of modern marine technology and cartography. It is highly unlikely that any of the aforementioned ancient sea names carried with them implications, recognitions, or assertions of territorial sovereignty.

² The territory of ancient Cham is now part of Vietnam. National Geographic published an article by Adam Bray, titled "The Cham: Descendants of Ancient Rulers of South China Sea Watch Maritime Dispute from Sidelines" on 18 June 2014, after the Sino-Vietnamese naval clash in May 2014 in the South China Sea. See BBC News, 7 May 2014, "Vietnam and China ships 'collide in South China Sea'" on <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27293314>. Bray suggests that it was the Cham who once dominated the South China Sea for more than a millennium, and had a vast trade network, with routes extending northeast to China, Taiwan, and Japan and south to Malaysia and Indonesia. See: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/06/140616-south-china-sea-vietnam-china-cambodia-champa/>

4. Sea names of imagined territorial implication

The question of when sea names started to refer to territorial implication remains an open one. Some would argue that the proclamation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982 delineating the 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) makes a turning point in terms of maritime territorial imagination. The concept of an EEZ merely grants a state special rights concerning the exploration and utilization of marine resources through such activities as energy production and extraction. Unlike the designation of *territorial sea*, which refers to the area stretching twelve nautical miles from the coastal baseline, the EEZ does not confer full sovereignty over the waters, but only establishes the coastal state's rights below the surface of the sea. Nevertheless, having the sea named after a country still typically gives rise to plenty of perceived territorial sovereignty over the waters in question, or, at the very least, allows a nation to bask in the glory of the appearance of its projected power over the sea.

The name *South China Sea*, together with the “nine-dashed line” claimed by China after World War II, which follows the shape of a large U and encircles most of the waters (Hayton 2014: 56–59), represents the culmination of the geographical imagination of a sea as exclusive territory (Figure 5). Vietnam visualizes the u-shaped dashed line as a cow tongue that endeavors to lick up all the water in the sea (Figure 6). Therefore, the name South China Sea *per se* seems to bolster the Chinese claim over the body of water within the unilaterally proclaimed U-shaped dashed line.

Figure 5. The U-shaped ocean territory claimed by China

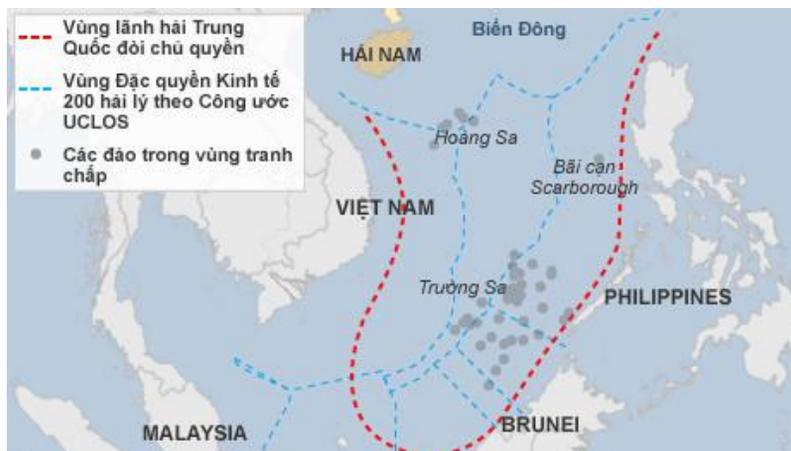


Figure 6. Political cartoon showing the cow tongue of China in the South China Sea



Source: "Feature: China's hegemony dream in caricature," *Tuoi Tre News / The News Gateway of Vietnam*, 29 June 2014 <http://tuoitrenews.vn/features/20656/chinas-hegemony-dream-in-caricatures>

Figure 7. Map showing the West Philippines Sea



Source: http://www.ndfp.org/sayt/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Philippines_panatag-spratley.jpg

A less-frequently used counterpart of the *South China Sea* is the *West Philippine Sea*, a name which has been utilized to replace the *South China Sea* in the official advisories issued by the Philippines since 2011, especially when said advisories refer to the disputed Spratly islands. The state agency of the Philippines took the waters between Japan and Korea, known as the East Sea to the Koreans, and the *Sea of Japan* to the Japanese, as a precedent, and argued that the use of local names for international bodies of water has long been a common practice among countries. Therefore, while the body of water east of the Philippines is still called the *Philippine Sea* by the Philippines, the waters west of the Philippines have been renamed as the *West Philippine Sea* (Figure 7).³ The *West Philippine Sea*, which refers to the parts of the *South China Sea* within the Philippines' EEZ according to Administrative Order No. 29 signed by Philippine President Benigno Aquino III, covers more area what was included under the older sea name used by the Philippines, *Luzon Sea* or *Dagat Luzon*, which only referred to the maritime area within Philippine territorial waters.⁴

5. The Southeast Asia Sea

Since the South China Sea is located between two regions, (South) China or East Asia and Southeast Asia, and because most of this water body is surrounded by the area commonly referred to as “Southeast Asia,” the latter being a regional identity that was only created in the 1940s, people or organizations opposed to using the term South China Sea have proposed an alternative name, the Southeast Asia Sea, as a geographical name devoid of any reference to a nation state. For instance, the Nguyen Thai Hoc Foundation⁵, a charitable and educational non-profit organization based in Irvine,

³ Tarra Quismundo, “South China Sea renamed in the Philippines,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer/Asia News Network*, Jun 13, 2011. See:

<http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Asia/Story/A1Story20110613-283772.html>

⁴ In addition to the dispute over the naming of the sea, as a matter of fact, clashes over the naming of islands in the South China Sea had erupted even earlier. For instance, during the Cold War era the Philippines once claimed the name *Kalaya'an* or Freedomland for the disputed Spratlys, which are also called *Trường Sa* by the Vietnamese and *Nansha* (南沙) by the Chinese government (Tønnesson 2005: 216-217).

⁵ Nguyễn Thái Học (1902–1930) was a Vietnamese revolutionary who founded the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (*Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*) in French Indochina. He was captured and executed by the French colonial authorities after his abortive Yên Bái revolt. The Nguyen Thai Hoc Foundation was founded in

California, USA, a place where the Vietnamese American population is heavily concentrated, launched an international campaign bearing the moniker Change the name "South China Sea" to "Southeast Asia Sea" in order to petition the presidents and prime ministers of eleven Countries in Southeast Asia, along with the President of the United Nations Atlas of the Oceans, and the CEOs and presidents of twelve geographic organizations around the world to change the name "South China Sea" to "Southeast Asia Sea".⁶ The campaign appeals to the principle of multi-faceted global collaboration that emerged in the 20th century and references the formation of a sub-region in Asia called Southeast Asia as a means of addressing human needs in the international community. The proclamation of the campaign lists three points:

- The United Nations has officially recognized the region and named it "Southeast Asia".
- The countries of Southeast Asia encompass almost the entire South China Sea, with a total coastline measuring approximately 130,000 kilometers (81,250 miles) long, whereas Southern China's coastline measures only about 2,800 kilometers (1,750 miles) in length.
- Freedom of navigation on the sea is not restricted to a specific country. The oceans are a common heritage of mankind and that area in question has actually been used by the international community for centuries as the second most important maritime channel in the world.

The petition aims at asserting the paramountcy of maintaining freedom of navigation for the international community rather than conceding sovereignty over the sea to a specific country, and perceives the name South China Sea as an implying

2005 in order to uphold and promote the spirit of Nguyen Thai Hoc, to empower future generations with the spirit of social responsibility, and to cultivate future generations of leaders dedicated to building Vietnam into a great, prosperous, and moral nation within a united, powerful and peaceful Southeast Asia, according to its statement of official goals. The activities organized by the foundation aim at maintaining and collecting materials related to the legacy of Nguyen Thai Hoc, studying the history of Vietnam, protecting the natural environment of Southeast Asia and the Mekong River, in addition to its scholarship program, micro-financing program, and charitable activities. See:

<http://www.nguyenthaihocfoundation.com/>

⁶ See: <https://www.change.org/p/change-the-name-south-china-sea-to-southeast-asia-sea>

Chinese sovereignty or the existence of rights belonging to China. It appeals to change the name to reflect a post-WWII regional identity, namely a sub-region of Asia, comprising the countries that are geographically located south of China, east of India, west of New Guinea and north of Australia. These countries include the sovereign states of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, East Timor, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Among these countries, only Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei, and Vietnam actually border on the South China Sea.

How much weight does a sea name carry, in terms of implying state sovereignty? The Malaysian Insider, a bilingual news site in Malaysia, posted an article entitled “Time to rename South China Sea” in its “Side Views” column on 12 June, 2015. The author, Ferooze Ali, argues that a name will inevitably project a distinct culture, identity and even a connection to a certain community. A name is one of the most visible markers of national presence on maps, and territorial naming at the international level is widely employed as a strategic tool for creating new facts on the ground. Ali further argues that the use of the South China Sea label has encouraged China to equate the body of water with exclusive Chinese dominance. It also cloaks China with the appearance of legitimizing power that allows it to continue roaming the disputed waters and launch military operations. In other words, the South China Sea label seems to have contributed to allowing the Chinese military activity in the area to take places unhindered, so to speak. Therefore, the name change from South China Sea to a more universally acceptable name would result in any future Chinese military action being rightly perceived as intrusive and in direct violation of regulations governing international waters. Ali also points out that South East Asia Sea is a better choice than other alternatives such as the Southern Sea, an old label used in China before South China Sea came into usage.⁷

⁷ See: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/sideviews/article/time-to-change-the-name-of-south-china-sea-ferooze-ali>

6. Discussion and conclusion

As the implication of sea's names, including the South China Sea, has shifted away from designating traders' sailing destination and toward referencing a contiguous state's territory, the aim of the aforementioned proposed name change would basically be going against the existing trend of implying sovereignty. If the aim is to hinting at sovereignty, this could be achieved by giving the sea a new name with another state's name in the label, as was done by the Philippines in the case of the West Philippines Sea. Nevertheless, the international community may be unwilling to accept such a new label without vigorously interrogating the motivation behind the change, and thus, such effort may prove largely futile outside the sphere of a nation's domestic affairs. Another solution would be to adopt a label seemingly devoid of national connotations, such as *Biển Đông* or East Sea, as argued for by Vietnam. While this harkens back to the traditional usage among the peoples of a nation, problems may arise if the name South China Sea merely dropped the word "China". Under this assumed circumstance, the choice between *Biển Đông* or East Sea and *Nánhãi* or South Sea would undeniably give rise to a confrontation between competing nationalist impulses, despite the absence of any explicit connection to state in both sea names. As for the proposed new name Southeast Asia Sea, which utilizes a multi-national regional label to de-nationalize the current name South China Sea, the former still reflects the territorial concept. It relies on the internationally recognized post-WWII regional identity convention for naming, in order to internationalize the body of water. Since China is not a member of Southeast Asian states in a normal sense, the exclusion of China is the territorial idea behind the renaming of the body of water as the Southeast Asia Sea. Nonetheless, whatever name may be settled upon to replace the South China Sea label in the future, it is an irrefutable fact that the northern part of the waters still border China. In this sense, the label Southeast Asia Sea has been devised as a result of its symbolic power to meet the demands of the countries surrounding the sea, intentionally excluding China.

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