



Research Article

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Japan's Quiet Power: The Case of Tokyo's Vaccine Diplomacy to Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan's vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia has gained much traction as regional countries are wrestling with a dual challenge, i.e., navigating the pandemic and seeking economic recovery and growth. Japan's donation of coronavirus vaccine shots to Southeast Asian countries confronting this severe pandemic is one expression of Tokyo's strategic approach towards the region: helping regional countries in need and buttressing its status as a responsible stakeholder. What should deserve attention is that Tokyo has sought a more robust status with its niche diplomacy, the signature characteristic of middle powers, while keeping a low profile in its support for regional countries. The paper argues that as Japan is becoming more committed to the Indo-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia specifically, Tokyo's niche diplomacy of vaccine donations has sought to win the hearts and minds of regional countries. The non-traditional approach can foster Japan's status in Southeast Asia and widen its maneuvering space amid China's growing assertiveness. Japan's diplomatic statecraft portrayed via Tokyo's vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia may provide emerging middle powers with valuable lessons on strengthening their influence.

Keywords: *Japan's quiet power, vaccine diplomacy, COVID-19 pandemic, Southeast Asia*

1. Introduction

Despite the country's own Covid crisis conditions, Japan has been active in making vaccine diplomacy, particularly vaccine donations to Southeast Asia, a vital component of its foreign policy and leadership strategy. The Japanese government has embraced vaccine diplomacy enthusiastically as this strategy can serve a dual purpose. First, Japan has long prioritized Southeast Asia as a key component in its foreign policy, and reaching out to Southeast Asia in terms of vaccine donations

could be read as an effort to “strengthen its image as a humanitarian aid donor” (Beaty, 2021a). Second, Tokyo’s humanitarian outreach to its Southeast Asian partners came at an opportune moment. China has struggled to improve its global image and international reputation (Dziedzic, 2021) and this has been further exacerbated by its poor pandemic management and its campaigns of economic punishment towards countries calling for an inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dziedzic, 2021).

2. Literature Review

Japan’s vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia is a novel topic, which has received little attention from International Relations scholars. The literature thus far has examined Japan various aspects of Japan’s activities in this area. According to Coleman Beaty (Beaty, 2021a), Japan has sought to strengthen its image as a benign power and improve its reputation in the region at a time when regional countries have been worried about China’s intimidation in the region. Julian Ryall shares this notion but goes further by underscoring that “Japan had geopolitical concerns and was keen to raise its profile in the region” (Ryall, 2021). In an article for *Foreign Policy*, Samuel Ramani (Ramani, 2021) pointed out that Japan’s public health assistance acts as a strategic tool used to consolidate its partnership with countries in Southeast Asia at a time when mistrust of China is growing because of its regional hegemonic ambitions. The help offered by the Japanese government provides leverage for Japan in its efforts to build a web of alliances with like-minded countries in the region, thus counterbalancing the China’s influence. Nguyen Thanh Trung and Le Nguyen Dona’s article published in *Science and Technology Development Journal - Social Sciences & Humanities* resonates with this view, also arguing that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan’s traditional health diplomacy should be regarded as a counterbalancing move against Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. Hence, Japan’s support, according to the two authors, should be viewed as providing leverage to improve Japan’s image and as part of its soft-power strategy to enhance its influence in this important geopolitical region. Nguyen and Le further argue that Southeast Asia is a critical area in the current geopolitical competition between China and Japan and will continue to be of of vital importance for Japanese investment (Nguyen Thanh Trung, 2022).

Japan’s vaccine diplomacy has been juxtaposed with China’s vaccine donation to Southeast Asia. Sebastian Strangio (Strangio, 2021) astutely observe that “It is hard to view Japan’s donations in isolation from the concerted “vaccine diplomacy” that has been mounted by China’s government”. He also mentioned the mixed perception of Southeast Asian countries when receiving vaccines from China. Jati Satrio, Shanti Darmastuti, and Mansur Juned Khairulanwar argue in their article “Sino-Japanese Rivalry in Health Diplomacy Issue in Southeast Asia” that health diplomacy has emerged as the field of competition between the two great powers by saying, “[China and Japan] have their own means of conducting health diplomacy practices. China utilizes its extensive domestic health industry to supply medical aid and vaccine to countries in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, aside from assisting countries with medical aid, Japan is partnering with other Quad members in the planned vaccine’s distribution to Southeast Asian countries.” (Jati Satrio, 2021). Zaini (Zaini, 2021) offers a comprehensive look into China’s humanitarian diplomacy, and underlined that China’s efforts to win influence in the adjacent region has been constrained by its ambitions and hard power exertion.

3. Methodology

The article uses the “case study” as its main method in analyzing the rationale, dynamics, processes, outcomes, and implications of Japan’s vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia. As most of countries in Southeast Asia have been grappling to cope with the pandemic, Japan’s efforts of stepping up vaccine donation to countries in the region should receive comprehensive recognition. This study utilizes a wide variety of sources from governmental documents, such as the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health, research articles, analytical papers, reports, op-eds, and information

on mass media, news, published in English, Vietnamese, and Japanese. The aim of this article is to clarify the rationale, process, outcome, and prospect of Japan's engagement with Southeast Asia through looking into the case of Japan's vaccine donations to the region. Equally important, the authors also position Japan's vaccine diplomacy in the wider context of Tokyo's strategy of enhancing its reputation in the Southeast Asia region.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Humanitarian assistance

Japan's strategy of exporting vaccines to Southeast Asian nations is consonant with the overall decision of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Japan, the United States, Australia, and India constitute the "Quad"), to increase vaccine supplies to countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan's vaccine deliveries have targeted Southeast Asia in order to enhance Tokyo's diplomatic and humanitarian ties. As for Southeast Asia, recipient nations of vaccine donations from Japan include Vietnam, Cambodia, Brunei, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Timor-Leste. According to Japan's Foreign Minister, Toshimitsu Motegi, countries have been selected on the basis of "the infection situations of each applicant, the extent of vaccine shortages there and the nature of their relations with Japan before we decided on this provision" (Standard, 2021). As stated by Nguyen and Le, Japan has also been an important member of ASEAN+3, playing the coordinating role for the Quad's "vaccine diplomacy" in Southeast Asia, so Japan's focus on this region in the context of COVID-19 is also understandable (Nguyen Thanh Trung, 2022).

Japan's vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia has been conducted via bilateral donations and through the UN-backed Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility—a comprehensive mechanism "enables supply of COVID-19 vaccines swiftly at an affordable price, leveraging economies of scale through guaranteeing purchase and market demand for vaccine" (Japan, 2021b). As of December 2021, Japan has made about 16-million AstraZeneca deliveries to developing countries in Southeast Asia, most of which were sent directly (Times, 2021). As noted by Sebastian Strangio, "Perhaps the real reason that Japan opted to operate outside of the COVAX initiative is that it gives the government the freedom to target the vaccines to where they are most strategically beneficial" (Strangio, 2021). Though the number of infections in the five Southeast Asian countries has been increasing rapidly since Spring 2021, vaccine procurement in these countries was delayed. Minister Mogi explained the Japanese government's decision to target these nations by saying that ASEAN and Japan have a very important relationship and these countries and they are vital to the strategy of ensuring a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" – a vision that Japan has advocated (Nikkei, 2021). Japan's provision of COVID-19 vaccine doses has also been conducted through the COVAX international vaccine-sharing scheme. Amongst the Southeast Asian nations, Cambodia, Laos, and Timor-Leste receive vaccines doses from Japan via COVAX.

At the early stage of the pandemic, Japan was amongst the first countries to offer vaccine donations to the region. For instance, Vietnam was the first nation in Southeast Asia to receive COVID-19 vaccine aid from Japan, and vaccines batches are mainly distributed to Ho Chi Minh City for large priority groups (Linh, 2021). Vietnam was prioritized as Hanoi was struggling with the surge of COVID-19 cases since the end of April. But it is likely that it was also chosen because of the growing ties between Japan and Vietnam, for example, Vietnam was chosen for Prime Minister Suga's first overseas trip in October 2020 (K. News, 2021b). The Japanese government decided to donate vaccines directly to Vietnam in the hope that vaccine deployment could be delivered as soon as possible (NHK, 2021). Along with the vaccine supply, Japan also provided developing countries with cold-storage facilities that would help preserve the vaccines that were donated (Japan, 2021b). Japan's vaccine donations resonated with its overall emphasis of enhancing human security within the region. With AstraZeneca vaccines delivered to Manila, Japanese Ambassador to the Philippines Koshikawa Kazuhiko said that Tokyo sought to highlight its endeavor of ensuring that no one would get left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tomacruz, 2021).

The hall mark of Japan’s vaccine donations appears to be “less obvious, less strategic, but more inclusive,” and “it is hard to find in Japan’s vaccine diplomacy any explicit strategies to counter the Belt and Road Initiative of China or to secure the Free and Open Indo-Pacific cherished by the Quad” (Maiko Ichihara, 2021). In a press release in mid-July 2021, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs underlined that Japan would “continue to work towards securing equitable access to safe, effective and quality-assured vaccines through various support, responding to the needs of developing countries and the world, in cooperation with relevant countries and international organizations” (Japan, 2021a). Rather than asking for strategic *quid pro quos*, Japan emphasized that its ultimate goal of providing vaccines to vulnerable countries in Southeast Asia was based on humanitarian assistance.

In responding to a question about Tokyo’s vaccine diplomacy, Japan’s Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi underlined that vaccine support should be ultimately implemented “for the purposes of supporting developing countries and responding to international health issues,” demonstrating that Japan valued human security and equitable vaccine distribution over vaccine support “for a different purpose” (Japan, 2021d). Indeed, Japan has portrayed itself as an apolitical vaccine donor to Southeast Asian countries, engaging in the “fair distribution” of COVID-19 vaccine doses “regardless of whether the recipient countries are allies or partners” (Ramani, 2021).

Table 1: Southeast Asia’s inventory of vaccines from Japan (as of 1 December 2021)

Countries	Total doses donated directly by Japan	Shipment Date*	Total doses donated by Japan via COVAX	Shipment Date*
Brunei	100,000	September 24, 2021	0	
Cambodia	0		1,010,000	July 23 – August 8, 2021
Indonesia	4,150,000	July 1 – October 22, 2021	0	
Laos			620,000	August 3, 2021
Malaysia	1,000,000	July 1, 2021	0	
Myanmar	0		0	
Thailand	2,040,000	July 9 – October 15, 2021	0	
The Philippines	3,080,000	July 8 – October 30, 2021	0	
Timor-Leste	0		170,000	August 11, 2021
Vietnam	5,620,000	June 16 – November 25, 2021	0	

*Date of departure from Japan

Source: (Japan, 2021c).

Japan also provided further aid in the form of its “Last One Mile Support”—a delivery initiative to ensure that vaccines reached the designated vaccination sites, which was, in the words of Japan’s Foreign Minister Motegi, a prudent approach “to ensure vaccination down to the last person” (Japan, 2021e). In supporting Southeast Asian countries, Japan has embraced two agencies — the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to implement its policy.

Table 2: “Last One Mile Support” (as of 1 December 2021) (JPY 100 million)

Countries	Disbursement	Commitment Date	Implementation Agency
Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Vietnam	20.00	March 9, 2021	United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)
The Philippines	6.87	July 6, 2021	Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

Sources: (Japan, 2021c).

The goodwill generated by Tokyo's vaccine distributions to Southeast Asia has helped frame Japan as a reliable collaborative partner in the region. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam and Indonesia are the two top recipients of Japan's vaccine donations, and this reflects Japan's underlying strategy of prioritizing the enhancement of bilateral relations with these two regional middle-powers. Whilst Indonesia is usually considered the *de facto* leader of ASEAN (Post, 2021), Vietnam has become an emerging middle power in the Asia-Pacific, presenting the possibility of taking on the mantle of ASEAN leadership (Thu, 2021). Kei Koga, assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), further clarifies that whilst Indonesia has gained its reputation through its "pivotal role in enhancing ASEAN's diplomatic credibility", the strategic importance of Vietnam has grown due to its strategic partnership with Japan (Koga, 2021).

4.2 A counterweight to Beijing's vaccine diplomacy

Vaccine diplomacy by Beijing has also been associated with its strategy of influencing middle and small powers in the Southeast Asia, which has long been considered as China's "backyard" (Morris-Jung, 2017). Southeast Asia is a key target for China's vaccine outreach to the extent that "all the countries in the region have either purchased or received donations of Chinese-made shots" (Zaini, 2021). It has been undeniable that China has embraced vaccine diplomacy to bolster its soft power, enhance its reputation, and seek diplomatic and economic influence at a time when the Biden administration has sought to reengage with Southeast Asia. China's campaign has been good up to a point, but Beijing's vaccine outreach to its Southern neighbors has met with grave concerns. As an article in *The Economist* put it, "As the promised supplier of most of the region's vaccines, it intends not only to wipe from people's minds the memory of China as the origin of COVID-19 but also to engender a wave of gratitude for ending the pandemic. Its diplomats are making clear to South-East Asian governments that part of the deal is lavish praise for China" (Economist, 2021). Additionally, China's strategy of entrenching its influence in Southeast Asia via vaccine diplomacy has produced mixed results as Beijing has become more assertive in its territorial disputes with neighbors, particularly in the South China Sea.

In September 2021, China's deployment of military transport aircrafts to the Spratly Islands was met with official protests by Vietnam. In the words of the spokesperson for the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Le Thi Thu Hang, "China's act violates international laws, contravenes the basic principles guiding the handling of maritime issues between Vietnam and China, increases militarization and goes against the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and countries' ongoing efforts in the negotiation towards the Code of Conduct (COC) of Parties in the South China Sea" (V. N. News, 2021). Vietnam and China have long been involved in territorial disputes, this coupled with Beijing's growing maritime activities in the South China Sea has increased the mistrust between the two ideological neighbors, once considered to be comrades and brothers (Miller, 2015). Although Vietnam accepted China's vaccines, Vietnam remains vocal with regard to its continuing territorial disputes with its giant neighbor.

China's vaccine outreach to Southeast Asia has been a source of controversy, particularly with regard to the quality and efficiency of Chinese-made vaccines (Ma, 2021). Public concerns with regards to Chinese vaccines seem reasonable given that the "lack of peer-reviewed scientific data has allowed speculation about Sinovac – and in turn, Chinese vaccines more generally, for which it is seen as a standard bearer – to flourish" (B. News, 2021). Amid the slow rollout of vaccines in these countries and more dangerous COVID-19 variants (Rajah, 2021), Southeast Asian nations have sought to diversify the sources of vaccines and secure their supplies by reaching out to as many of countries as possible, including welcoming both Chinese vaccine donations and purchases. For these countries, the only way out of the pandemic seems to be securing sufficient vaccines, especially with the highly transmittable Delta variant. In middle and lower-income countries, workers have no choice but to get vaccinated, even with Chinese vaccines, as they are compelled to get two vaccine shots before going back to work (Sui-Lee Wee, 2021).

However, some countries receiving Chinese-made vaccines have encountered skepticism and even small protests from their citizens calling for an inquiry into the origin and effectiveness of Chinese vaccines. Vietnam serves as a case in point. In early June 2021, Vietnam's Health Ministry authorized China's Sinopharm vaccines for emergency use amid the surge of COVID-19 cases and supply shortage in the Southeast Asian country (Onishi, 2021). However, a wave of concern emerged when citizens were told they would receive Chinese doses because "vaccine skepticism and anti-China sentiment are closely interrelated in Vietnam" (Vincent, 2021).

While Japan has geopolitical concerns about China using its vaccine diplomacy to undermine Japan's influence in the region, Tokyo has a more strategic and long-term interest in the region. In 1977, Japanese former prime minister Takeo Fukuda underlined that Japan's engagement with Southeast Asia would be based on mutual interests and Japan would work with Southeast Asia as "an equal partner" (Times, 1977). Since the Shinzo Abe Administration, Japan has put Southeast Asia under the aegis of Tokyo's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" policy, which represents the culmination of decades long engagement with the region (Glosserman, 2021). From Shinzo Abe to Yoshihide Suga and the incumbent Kishida Fumio Administration, shaping a healthy and sustainable approach in Japan's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia has been a consensus in the three administrations' strategic consideration. Stepping up vaccine donations to Southeast Asia could leverage Tokyo's profile amid great and middle powers' (re)engagement with the region. As Southeast Asia stands at the geopolitical locus of the Indo-Pacific region, the United States, South Korea, Australia, India, and Taiwan have been forging economic, diplomatic and social ties within the region. For Japan, failing to buttress its diplomatic profile in the region would be regarded as a major shortcoming in its foreign policy. Hence, deploying vaccine diplomacy to Southeast Asia has been in line with Japan's strategic vision and helped increase Japan's reputation as one of the influential stakeholders in the area.

Amid worries about the growing influence of China in the region and lingering concerns of Chinese vaccines, Japan has emerged as a trustworthy partnership to regional countries. When compared to China's vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia, Tokyo's vaccine deployment to the region "comes as a response to China's shortcomings of its efforts to provide vaccines to other countries during the first half of 2021" (Beaty, 2021b). Essentially, Japan's comprehensive strategy to provide vaccines to its partners in the South is aimed at raising its political profile and burnishing its image in the region as a counterweight to Beijing's vaccine diplomacy. Put differently, Japan's reaching out to Southeast Asia has aimed to "help out its friends and neighbors" while also seeking to increase its regional influence (Ryall, 2021). Sending vaccines to foreign neighbors in Southeast Asia in the context of regional geopolitical competition consolidates Japan's status as a benign Indo-Pacific power.

As worldwide demand for vaccines grew, Japan found it necessary to seek a niche area that Tokyo could control, fostering its credibility in the region especially with countries that Tokyo holds strategic partnerships with, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. To be more concrete, Japan seems to appreciate that although China has long gained strong influence in Southeast Asia and has donated hundreds of millions of doses of vaccines to the area, these countries are not completely dependent on China's vaccine doses. Instead, countries in sought to diversify suppliers instead of putting all their eggs in one basket. Japan's supply of the vaccine gives Southeast Asian countries more supply options, thereby increasing Japan's influence and reducing the influence of China.

Even in countries that have an ideological affinity with China like Vietnam, the perception of Japan's vaccine diplomacy has been positive. In the words of Vietnam's Minister of Health Nguyen Thanh Long, Japan's batches of Covid-19 vaccines are precious gifts showcasing the good relationship between the government and people of Japan with the government and people of Vietnam, particularly amid the deadly pandemic and the ongoing shortage of vaccine supplies (Tu, 2021). From Japan's side, its ambassador to Vietnam Yamada Takio emphasized that Japan's vaccine provision to Vietnam was a lasting testament to the deep friendship between the two countries. Takio also highlighted that "Japan would align with the international community, especially Vietnam, to overcome the pandemic" (Quoc, 2021).

5. Discussion

A quiet-power model in the Indo-Pacific is what Japan has sought through its vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Japan has maintained stable and sincere relations with Southeast Asian countries. Japan has created a synergy between its Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). By underlining “Japan’s support for and cooperation with ASEAN through the AOIP” (ASEAN, 2021) it has enhanced its ties in the region. As the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented Japan and Southeast Asian nations from conducting in-person diplomacy, Japan’s vaccine diplomacy could open a new channel for deepening ties. Whilst offering vaccines to Southeast Asian states, Japan has continued to seek practical and accommodating engagement with Southeast Asian partners even in tough and challenging times. Accommodating ASEAN’s requests for vaccines has served the interests of both sides.

Japan has gained much traction in Southeast Asia as a humanitarian aid donor. Though China gained first-mover advantage as the major vaccine supplier to the region, it lost this advantage when the United States and Japan stepped up their vaccine assistance to these countries. In offering vaccines to Southeast Asia, Japan has refrained from using its diplomatic weight overly. Instead, Japan played a constructive role in “bolstering its reputation as a trusted and predictable player in regional politics” (CSIS, 2020). According to the 2021 annual State of Southeast Asia Survey Report, produced by the *ASEAN Studies Center* at Singapore’s ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Japan remains the most trusted strategic power in the hedging game against the uncertainties of the rivalry between the United States and China, with a notable increase from 61.2% in 2020 to 67.1% in 2021 (Seah, 2021). In Japan, the strategic gain is an increase in the popularity of Southeast Asia, which makes it easier for the Japanese government to foster Tokyo’s relationship with governments in the region. With its vaccine outreach, Japan has demonstrated Tokyo’s commitment to ASEAN countries (Seah, 2021).

The synthesis of timely vaccine donations to Southeast Asia and Japan’s quiet power projection—mostly through soft power, allows it to win influence in the region in the context of China’s faltering vaccine diplomacy. As “ASEAN countries desperately need access to more vaccines” (Stromseth, 2021), Japan’s ongoing vaccine diplomacy would likely get Tokyo a strategic card as Southeast Asian countries would be impressed by what Tokyo has offered and its commitment towards engaging with the region. David Shambaugh, Gaston Sigur Professor of Asian Studies at George Washington University, aptly pointed out that most of Southeast Asia is “quick to react to larger powers seeking to establish asymmetric relationships and acting with arrogance” and “has historically proved itself adroit at maneuvering and hedging” (Shambaugh, 2020). This provides Japan with an opportunity to increase its influence – and it has used its vaccine outreach initiative to do so.

Japan’s astute approach to vaccine provisions will likely have long-lasting effect on its engagement with Southeast Asia. As Southeast Asian nations’ diplomacy is practiced through the art of pragmatism and incrementalism, Japan’s humility following its generous vaccine donations to Southeast Asians has earned the East Asian power a favorable reputation as a trustworthy and soft-power player in the region. Vaccine diplomacy could be translated into soft power given Japan’s benign engagement with Southeast Asia, especially when China’s so-called ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy has undermined Beijing’s efforts to consolidate its power in the region. Another advantage for Japan may lie in Washington’s fostering of its (re)engagement with Southeast Asia under the incumbent Biden administration, which has increased Japan’s strategic leverage. With Washington’s strategic support, Japan will most likely seek to increase its influence in the region and eventually make China’s domination less likely.

6. Conclusion

The positive impression that Tokyo created with its vaccine deliveries to countries in Southeast Asia is likely to continue. With the coming to power of Fumio Kishida as Japan’s new prime minister in October 2021, Japan will most likely continue to seek closer ties with Southeast Asia. In his first

meeting with ASEAN leaders through a virtual ASEAN-plus-three summit in late October, Japanese prime minister Kishida underscored his commitment to cooperate closely with ASEAN nations by saying, “This time, as prime minister, I will work closely with ASEAN and strongly promote efforts toward realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific” (K. News, 2021a). Tokyo’s quiet engagement with the region has been buttressed via its vaccine diplomacy to these countries. Southeast Asian governments, will “look to the Kishida administration to maintain leadership in vaccine diplomacy and general foreign aid provision as they seek to recover from the pandemic” (Ciorciari, 2021). Tokyo’s future vaccine outreach to Southeast Asian states under Kishida needs to be monitored and evaluated, but thus far Japan’s quiet power projection via vaccine diplomacy has laid a robust foundation for the incumbent government to build upon.

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