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The Digital Battlefield: Populism, State Power and Narrative Warfare in Pakistan

Angana Kotokey *

Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed political competition, communication, and the exercise of power in Pakistan. Social media platforms, artificial intelligence (AI), and online communication networks have emerged as important arenas where political legitimacy is contested, narratives are constructed, and public opinion is shaped. This paper examines how digitalisation has reconfigured Pakistan's political landscape by empowering opposition forces, particularly Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), while strengthening state-led mechanisms of narrative control. It also explores how digitalisation has extended beyond domestic politics to become an important instrument of perception management and digital diplomacy. By examining narratives surrounding conflicts with India and Afghanistan, alongside Pakistan's efforts to present itself as a regional peace broker, the study analyses how digital platforms are used to construct images of military strength, victimhood, strategic relevance, and diplomatic success. The paper argues that cyberspace has become a central battleground where political actors compete for legitimacy, influence, and control, making digitalisation an important force shaping contemporary politics in Pakistan.



1. Introduction

Until recently, religion-based discourse[1] played an important role in mobilising popular support and legitimising governance in Pakistan.[2] The expression of populism and popular support, though, appears to be increasingly shaped by digitalisation, particularly through the use of artificial intelligence (AI). As digital platforms have become integral to

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political engagement, governance, and public debate, AI is beginning to influence how politics in Pakistan is conducted, perceived and contested.[3]

The expansion of digital technologies has transformed political communication, public engagement, and the exercise of power across the country. Digitalisation has emerged as an arena where political legitimacy is contested, narratives are constructed, and authority is exercised.[4] In recent years, the federal government, the military establishment, and former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), have made extensive use of digital platforms to shape political narratives, reinforce authority, and secure legitimacy. Social media platforms, artificial intelligence, and online communication networks have altered traditional state-society relations by creating opportunities for political mobilisation, dissent, and perception management.[5] Political competition in Pakistan now extends beyond electoral institutions, parliamentary politics, and conventional media into the digital sphere.

This paper makes an attempt to explore whether digitalisation has become a double-edged political instrument in Pakistan. Digital platforms have enabled opposition forces, particularly PTI and Imran Khan, to sustain populist support, challenge state narratives, and retain political relevance despite institutional restrictions and allegations of political repression. Through social media networks, peer-to-peer communication, and AI-driven technologies, PTI has converted digital platforms into tools of political resistance and virtual activism. The state and military establishment have also sought to use these technologies to manage public perceptions, shape national narratives, and consolidate political authority. Concepts such as "digital terrorism," online surveillance, and state-led narrative construction reflect efforts to regulate dissent and control information flows.[6]

The paper further examines how digitalisation has expanded beyond domestic political competition to become an important component of Pakistan's regional and international image-building strategy. Through digitally mediated narratives surrounding conflicts with India and Afghanistan, along with Pakistan's participation in regional diplomacy, the state has sought to project images of military strength, victimhood, strategic relevance, and peacemaking. Digital platforms have therefore become important spaces

for political resistance and perception management, allowing competing actors to shape public understanding of governance, security, and national identity.

By examining the intersection of populism, artificial intelligence, digital activism and state-led narrative construction, this paper seeks to understand how digitalisation is reshaping Pakistan's political landscape. It also highlights the growing significance of cyberspace as a domain where opposition movements, civilian governments, and the military establishment compete to secure legitimacy, influence public opinion, and retain control in an increasingly digital political environment.

2. Virtual Populism and Political Resistance: Imran Khan in Pakistan's Digital Age

The transformation of Pakistan's digital landscape is particularly visible in the rise of PTI and Imran Khan's brand of populist politics. Digital technologies have enabled political actors to bypass traditional institutions, engage directly with citizens, and sustain support during periods of political repression. PTI's experience illustrates how digitalisation has become an instrument of political resistance and mobilisation in contemporary Pakistan. The military establishment and PTI have increasingly relied on data analytics, social media algorithms, and AI-driven tools to reach and influence the public. These technologies facilitate targeted outreach while also creating risks related to one-sided narratives, emotional manipulation, and unequal political influence, particularly in societies where digital literacy varies widely.[7]

PTI's digital strategy, and the sustained populist support for Imran Khan, developed well before the party formed the federal government in 2018. The party made extensive use of virtual media platforms to build its organisational identity and shape the public image of Khan as a political leader.[8] PTI was frequently described as a 'social media party', while Imran Khan was derided as 'Facebook Khan' during the early 2000s.[9] Following Khan's swearing-in as Pakistan's 22nd Prime Minister in 2018, the party continued to promote his political vision through online visibility and a structured communication strategy.[10]

PTI developed a culture of bottom-up innovation to strengthen its peer-to-peer communication networks (P2P). These networks became important for maintaining contact with supporters, particularly during the party's exclusion from

conventional political channels and the restrictions surrounding the 2024 elections.[11] The party drew on Pakistan's technologically proficient younger population to disseminate its political narrative and vision through digital platforms.[12]

Following his retirement from cricket, Imran Khan's public image and political vision were shaped around *Tabdeeli* (Change) and *Naya Pakistan* (New Pakistan). These ideas focused on challenging the existing political order, addressing corruption, establishing an Islamic welfare state, and criticising US policies after the September 11 attacks.[13] Social media platforms, including Facebook and X, formerly Twitter, helped circulate these ideas across the country. PTI's online outreach contributed to Khan's popularity, particularly among younger voters, and helped shape an ideological identity widely referred to as 'Imranism'.[14]

Technology also played a role in sustaining Khan's appeal by promoting the idea that Pakistan faced a political crisis or an existential threat that required immediate change.[15] PTI's digital communication frequently framed corruption and cultural globalisation as threats to national identity and sovereignty. This approach supported a strongman-oriented political style centred on hypermasculine leadership and presented Khan as the leader best positioned to address the country's challenges.[16]

PTI has remained one of Pakistan's most active political parties in developing P2P connections. It has sought to bypass traditional media outlets and maintain direct engagement with supporters through platforms including WhatsApp and TikTok. These platforms have become an important part of the party's electoral strategy. As Uzair Yunus explains:

Just days before the 2024 federal elections, a Supreme Court decision banned PTI's traditional electoral symbol, the cricket bat. In response, the PTI and its volunteers used social media networks to make sure that voters in each constituency knew who the PTI-aligned candidate was and their electoral symbol. Bolstered by a bottom-up media ecosystem and by leveraging platforms like YouTube and TikTok, PTI-aligned representatives from different constituencies engaged with the public, although the party was virtually blacked out from mainstream media.[17]

The party also became one of the first political organisations in Pakistan to make extensive use of AI during an election campaign. PTI organised a virtual rally in which jailed Imran Khan addressed

supporters through an AI-generated audio clip. The event was described as the first of its kind in South Asia.[18] Additional AI-generated videos featuring Khan were subsequently circulated in shorter formats across social media, helping maintain his visibility among supporters and the wider public.[19]

Since his imprisonment in 2022, digital platforms and artificial intelligence have continued to support Khan's populist appeal.[20] PTI's use of social media has helped preserve his presence among supporters in Pakistan while also maintaining his visibility in international media. Reports indicated that, since August 2024, Khan had interacted with ten international media organisations, including The Telegraph, Reuters, The Wall Street Journal, and Fox News, keeping him within the international news cycle.[21]

Social media influencers in Pakistan have also helped maintain the former prime minister's virtual presence. His prison number 804 became popular on TikTok, where it was incorporated into songs and videos. The number was also used in graffiti, chanted during cricket matches, and displayed in restaurants in Pakistan and abroad.[22] Khan's continued popularity contributed to international attention surrounding his detention. Since 2024, several US lawmakers have described his imprisonment as wrongful persecution and the imprisonment of political opponents in Pakistan.[23]

The Pakistan Democracy Act, introduced in the US House of Representatives in 2025, also reflected congressional efforts to address democratic conditions in Pakistan. The proposed legislation included sanctions on Field Marshal Asim Munir.[24] These developments illustrate how AI-enabled technologies and digital networks can be used to challenge official narratives and maintain political mobilisation under restrictive conditions.

At the same time, competition over cyberspace has intensified the conflict between PTI and Pakistan's military establishment. Khan's transnational digital presence has also sustained interest in India. This was visible when former members of the Indian cricket team, alongside other international figures, expressed concern over reports about Khan's health, including claims concerning the deterioration of his vision while in custody. They appealed to Pakistani authorities for his fair treatment.[25]

PTI's digital outreach has therefore played an important role in

preserving populist mobilisation in Pakistan. Its experience challenges the assumption that political visibility necessarily declines when a leader is removed from public spaces. In Khan's case, digital platforms have allowed his political image and message to circulate despite his imprisonment.[26] Digitalisation has altered political competition in Pakistan by helping opposition forces retain public support and challenge official narratives.

The state's attempts to restrict Khan's digital presence have faced difficulties.[27] In response, state institutions and the military establishment have pursued additional mechanisms to regulate online platforms and shape political discourse. One example is the Firewall, reportedly developed with Chinese technology. Although the government has presented such systems as measures intended to protect national security, critics interpret them as tools to limit PTI's digital influence and restrict online dissent.[28]

The growing use of terms such as digital terrorism has also raised questions about the distinction between genuine cyber threats and political criticism. Critics argue that the concept may be used to expand state control over online spaces and suppress political narratives that challenge the government or military establishment.

3. Digital Terrorism: Reconfiguring Political Power by Eliminating Dissent

As discussed, digitalisation has become an important force in Pakistan's political landscape. It has afforded space for online dissent and virtual activism while increasing public awareness of governance failures and policy decisions. The term 'digital terrorism' was introduced during the 83rd Formation Commanders' Annual Conference at General Headquarters (GHQ) in May 2024, chaired by Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Asim Munir.[29]

Pakistan Army's media wing, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), elaborated on the term during the conference. It stated that "digital terrorism, allegedly perpetrated by those abetted by foreign cohorts, is clearly meant to try to induce despondency in the Pakistani nation, sow discord among national institutions, and the people of Pakistan by peddling blatant lies, fake news, and propaganda."[30]

The Pakistani military has repeatedly claimed that digital platforms are being used to spread

anarchy and false information against the armed forces. Rights activists, though, argue that digital terrorism remains poorly defined and could be applied to individuals who criticise the military online.[31] Abdul Basit argues that the Pakistani military establishment introduced the term after failing to weaken PTI despite what he describes as widespread manipulation during the February 8 general elections.[32] According to Basit, describing political opponents or critics of the government and military as digital terrorists could weaken democratic institutions and undermine counterterrorism efforts against non-state actors.[33]

Pakistan's socio-political, economic, and security vulnerabilities provide an important context for the emergence of this discourse. The use of digital terrorism appears to blur the distinctions between cybercrime, terrorism, public dissent, political criticism, and misinformation. These categories involve different forms of conduct and require separate legal and institutional responses. Their consolidation under a single label creates questions about the scope of state authority over online expression.

Since Imran Khan's imprisonment, tensions between the state and society, as well as between the military and judiciary, have been reflected in print and digital media. Earlier attempts by the Supreme Court to acquit Khan of legal charges intensified the reported confrontation between the judiciary, the military, and the civilian government. The subsequent reshuffling of judges, replacing Khan's sympathisers with individuals aligned with Munir, further deepened these tensions.[34] PTI used platforms including WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok to circulate information about these developments, bringing the issue to a wider audience and intensifying public criticism of the state.

The growing state-society divide cannot be attributed solely to Khan's detention. Public discontent was also visible during the launch of the government's counterterrorism initiative, Operation Azm-e-Istehkam. PTI and the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) opposed the operation and mobilised protests, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Their objections focused on the perceived lack of transparency, limited consultation, and insufficient political consensus.[35] Critics also raised concerns about the possibility of large-scale displacement in the province.[36]

PTI mobilised public opposition to the operation by presenting it as a

military-led initiative introduced without adequate parliamentary debate. The party also argued that the campaign could cause physical and psychological harm to local communities, particularly Pashtuns.[37] These concerns gained visibility on digital platforms, allowing political organisations and civil society groups to circulate their interpretations of the proposed operation.

The implementation of the Pakistan Mineral Act in provinces, including Balochistan and KP, generated another wave of public opposition. Local communities viewed the legislation as an infringement on provincial autonomy and an intrusion into their rights.[38] Critics argued that the legislation could strengthen the central government's authority, marginalise local communities, and provide foreign companies with greater access to mineral resources. Questions were also raised about employment opportunities and the distribution of royalties.[39]

These developments prompted broader debate over transparency, federal overreach, and the weakening of the 18th Amendment, which had previously granted provinces authority to issue mining licences.[40] Digital networks, including YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp, helped bring these issues to public attention. PTI remained an important force in mobilising local sentiment and shaping political narratives.

Digital platforms have therefore become spaces where public opinion is formed and official decisions are questioned. They have also been used to challenge constitutional reforms and examine the distribution of power between civilian institutions and the military. PTI has relied on its media networks to maintain a virtual presence among supporters while drawing attention to what it describes as the erosion of democratic institutions in Pakistan.[41]

Disagreements with the federal government are increasingly interpreted by state institutions and their supporters as anti-army propaganda.[42] This approach places political criticism within a national security framework, making it easier for authorities to treat political opposition as a security concern. The classification of dissent as digital terrorism has consequently contributed to a more centralised approach to narrative control.

Digitalisation has also enabled the establishment to shift public attention from domestic governance problems towards external and

international issues. This process relies heavily on perception management, through which political actors attempt to shape how citizens interpret national developments and security challenges. The emergence of digital terrorism as a governing discourse indicates that digitalisation has become an instrument of state power rather than simply a space for political contestation. These tools are used to manage domestic dissent and influence external perceptions of Pakistan's security environment and international role.

4. Digital World: Resistance to Perception Management

Digital platforms have become important in developing civic awareness and enabling public responses to government policies, reform measures, and constitutional changes in Pakistan. Government inefficiencies in managing a fragile economy and an unstable security environment have faced growing scrutiny on online networks. Inter-party disagreements and public dissatisfaction have also received greater visibility through social media.

In response, the civil-military establishment has sought to manage dominant perceptions by creating what critics describe as an 'illusion of success'.[43] A significant part of this narrative has been constructed around Pakistan's engagement in regional conflicts. The country has at different times presented itself as a participant in regional security crises and, more recently, as a mediator seeking to facilitate diplomatic solutions.

4.1 Operation Sindoor and Its Aftermath

Digital platforms, alongside print and broadcast media, have influenced how victory is understood in contemporary conflicts. Military success is increasingly interpreted through public perception, strategic messaging, and the ability to project resilience. This was visible after India launched Operation Sindoor in May 2025.

The four-day conflict between India and Pakistan followed the Pahalgam attack in Jammu and Kashmir in 2025. During and after the confrontation, Pakistan engaged in narrative warfare that shifted attention from battlefield developments towards its nuclear capabilities, missile technology, and air power.[44] Through perception management, the Pakistani establishment sought to frame the conflict in terms of national sovereignty and resistance to what it presented as an existential threat.

The post-conflict period provided an opportunity to redirect public attention from Pakistan's domestic difficulties. Nationalist discourse portrayed New Delhi as the aggressor, while international media coverage of Pakistan's military response was used to support claims of resilience and strategic strength.[45] The draft argues that sections of the global media placed disproportionate emphasis on Pakistan's military performance, contributing to an understanding of the conflict that reflected Islamabad's preferred narrative.

The Pakistani establishment, supported by traditional and digital media platforms, promoted an image of military success through initiatives such as the Day of Gratitude, which was organised to honour the armed forces across the country.[46] The campaign served domestic and international purposes. Within Pakistan, it helped redirect public attention towards national security and military achievement. Externally, it supported Islamabad's effort to maintain relevance among international partners.

The public celebration of the armed forces also contributed to the construction of an image of success. This narrative was reinforced by reports that Pakistani media outlets had been encouraged to reduce front-page coverage of Imran Khan.[47] Restrictions on opposing voices, whether in traditional media or on digital platforms, can influence which issues receive public attention and the terms on which political authority is evaluated.

Since 2022, the role of the army and the ruling establishment has been assessed through multiple lenses, including their treatment of political opponents, particularly Imran Khan. The discussion has increasingly expanded to include their handling of international crises, military confrontations, and Pakistan's position in regional diplomacy.

4.2 Open War between Afghanistan and Pakistan

Pakistan's approach to perception management has also relied on narratives of fear and victimhood.[48] This approach became visible in its evolving relationship with Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021. In his analysis of Pakistan's 'Fear Factory', A. Naweed Kawusi, a retired colonel of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), argues that ISPR's psychological warfare strategy is designed to support the Pakistani government's political objectives and reinforce its relevance.[49]

Kawusi examines this approach in the context of the 'Open War' between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which the draft identifies as having been declared in February 2026. His analysis suggests that Pakistan's internal problems have received less attention as civilian and military leaders have presented the country as a victim of external threats.

One example concerns the weapons left behind by the United States in Afghanistan. These weapons have been presented in Pakistani discourse as a major security risk, particularly because militant groups operating inside Pakistan are alleged to use them against the state. Afghanistan's political status has also been reframed. Following the US withdrawal, Pakistan initially presented the Taliban's return to power as the liberation of Afghanistan. Later narratives increasingly described the country as unstable and poorly governed.

The Afghan Taliban, once considered a close partner of Pakistan, has also been portrayed as an unreliable actor. This shift has supported a narrative centred on insecurity, betrayal, and victimhood.[50] Pakistani mainstream media has framed the conflict through themes of national security, state sovereignty, humanitarian displacement, and external threats.[51]

This narrative places substantial responsibility on external actors and supports a state-centred interpretation of Pakistan's military actions.[52] Digital platforms have played an important role in circulating these messages and extending their reach beyond conventional media audiences. The resulting discourse links national security to public perceptions of threat, allowing the government and the military establishment to justify their responses by appealing to a broader narrative of national vulnerability.

4.3 Pakistan's Mediation in the US-Israel-Iran Conflict

Islamabad's efforts to position itself within global crisis management have presented Pakistan as a potential mediator in tensions involving the United States and Iran.[53] Several analysts interpret Pakistan's participation in negotiations surrounding the US-Israel-Iran conflict as an expression of national self-preservation. From this perspective, Islamabad's role has been shaped less by broad geopolitical ambitions than by its economic and security vulnerabilities.[54]

Following the start of direct talks between the United States and Iran in the Pakistani capital in April, media outlets across print and digital platforms provided extensive coverage of the negotiations.[55] Billboards in Islamabad also promoted the talks, which were presented as an important moment in Pakistan's diplomatic history. The coverage gave the impression that the negotiations were close to producing a settlement, even though the process remained in its early stages.[56]

The difference between public expectations and the actual progress of the talks illustrates the role of perception management in Pakistan's diplomatic communication. Although the negotiations exposed limitations in the country's ability to shape outcomes, presenting the Islamabad Talks as a major diplomatic achievement helped strengthen Pakistan's image as a relevant regional actor.[57]

The cases of Operation Sindoor, the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict, and Pakistan's mediation efforts in the US-Israel-Iran crisis demonstrate how digital narrative construction extends beyond domestic politics into foreign policy and regional diplomacy. In each case, digital platforms have been used to frame Pakistan's role as that of a resilient military power, a victim of external threats, or a responsible regional peace broker.

Digitalisation thus serves two related purposes. Domestically, it supports political messaging by directing public attention towards national security, external threats, and diplomatic activity. Internationally, it helps project narratives aimed at strengthening Pakistan's diplomatic relevance and strategic image. The effectiveness of these narratives depends on the extent to which domestic audiences, international partners, and foreign publics accept the interpretations being promoted.

The movement from digital resistance to perception management has created political and strategic opportunities for Islamabad, particularly for the Sharif government and Field Marshal Asim Munir. Pakistan's diplomatic positioning during regional crises has brought public recognition from sections of the Trump administration, which presented Islamabad as a contributor to peace efforts. Munir's international visibility has also increased alongside his involvement in crisis management.

These developments have implications for Pakistan's domestic politics. The federal government, which had faced criticism over the 2024 election process and the political

exclusion of Imran Khan and PTI, has sought to recover public acceptance through narratives of diplomatic relevance and national security. At the same time, the elevation of Munir's international profile may strengthen the military's influence over domestic affairs and foreign policy.

The extent to which these narratives have affected PTI's support base remains uncertain. Khan's political influence continues to operate through digital networks, while the establishment has attempted to develop competing images centred on military leadership, diplomatic relevance, and crisis management. PTI's emphasis on economic instability, political uncertainty, and security challenges may face greater competition from narratives that portray the government and military as protectors of national interests.

5. Conclusion

Digitalisation is reshaping political discourse and political competition in Pakistan.[58] Social media, which initially provided an avenue for government accountability and public oversight, has expanded into a broader political environment involving mobilisation, narrative construction, and perception management. AI-powered technologies have become increasingly relevant to the organisation of political campaigns, the circulation of populist messages, and the shaping of public opinion.

The federal government, military establishment, and opposition forces, particularly PTI, use digital platforms to express dissent, maintain political relevance, secure legitimacy, and influence public discourse.[59] Their competing strategies demonstrate that cyberspace has become an important arena for political organisation and institutional contestation.

Pakistan has also expanded its digital information and perception management capabilities at the domestic and international levels. The analysis presented in this paper points to the state's growing institutional ambition to shape political narratives. The effectiveness of these efforts, though, cannot be established solely through the scale of state investment or the visibility of official messaging.

Narratives centred on military resilience, victimhood, strategic relevance, and regional peacemaking have been used to shape public perceptions of Pakistan's role in regional and international affairs. The extent to which these narratives have generated lasting political legitimacy, altered international perceptions, or

produced durable strategic benefits remains open to examination.

Some strategic analysts argue that Pakistan's narrative diplomacy has supported wider diplomatic initiatives. These include efforts to reinforce the country's image during the Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact of 2025 and to present it as a regional peace broker during the US-Israel-Iran crisis.[60] These diplomatic developments may also have coincided with Riyadh's decision to provide Pakistan with an additional $3 billion to ease financial pressures ahead of debt repayments to the United Arab Emirates.[61] The financial assistance cannot be attributed solely to digital narratives. Geopolitical interests, economic considerations, bilateral relations, and security cooperation also shape such decisions.

Digital diplomacy should therefore be understood as one element of Pakistan's broader foreign policy strategy. Its impact is connected to military capabilities, economic vulnerabilities, regional partnerships, and diplomatic engagement. The digital presentation of Pakistan as a resilient state or regional mediator may strengthen official messaging, but its long-term influence depends on the credibility of the claims advanced and the responses from domestic and international audiences.

The continued popularity of Imran Khan and PTI in the digital sphere, ongoing political contestation, and persistent governance challenges indicate that narrative construction remains contested.[62] The state and military establishment have developed mechanisms to promote preferred messages, while opposition actors continue to use digital networks to challenge official interpretations and mobilise public support.

Digitally mediated narratives have increasingly centred on themes of success, victory, fear, humiliation, victimhood, patriotism, and heroism. These themes are readily amplified by algorithms that favour emotionally engaging content. They have allowed state institutions and the military establishment to reinforce preferred political messages and maintain engagement with sections of the Pakistani diaspora, which remains closely connected to political developments at home.

At the same time, the circulation of competing narratives limits the possibility of complete state control over cyberspace. Political actors continue to reinterpret events, challenge official statements, and influence public debate through online platforms. The digital sphere therefore remains a space of

contestation in which legitimacy is negotiated rather than permanently secured by a single institution.

Pakistan's digital transformation should be understood as an evolving process through which political actors adapt new technologies to influence public opinion and negotiate authority. Digitalisation has not displaced conventional political competition. It has created an additional arena where state institutions, political parties, civil society groups, and individual users construct, challenge, and revise political narratives.

As digital technologies continue to develop, their influence on Pakistan's domestic politics, civil-military relations, and regional diplomacy is likely to expand. Understanding the country's political trajectory will therefore require sustained attention to the relationship between digital communication, institutional power, populist mobilisation, and narrative warfare.

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speeches to build a political narrative that appeals to people's faith and win their trust (Kotokey, 2025).

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