



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

China's Alternative Order And What America Should Learn From It

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By now, Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambition to remake the world is undeniable. He wants to dissolve Washington's network of alliances and purge what he dismisses as "Western" values from international bodies. He wants to knock the U.S. dollar off its pedestal and eliminate Washington's chokehold over critical technology. In his new multipolar order, global institutions and norms will be underpinned by Chinese notions of common security and economic development, Chinese values of state-determined political rights, and Chinese technology. China will no longer have to fight for leadership. Its centrality will be guaranteed.

To hear Xi tell it, this world is within reach. At the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs last December, he boasted that Beijing was (in the words of a government press release) a “confident, self-reliant, open and inclusive major country,” one that had created the world’s “largest platform for international cooperation” and led the way in “reforming the international system.” He asserted that his conception for the global order—a “community with a shared future for mankind”—had evolved from a “Chinese initiative” to an “international consensus,” to be realized through the implementation of four Chinese programs: the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative.

Outside China, such brash, self-congratulatory proclamations are generally disregarded or dismissed—including by American officials, who have tended to discount the appeal of Beijing’s strategy. It is easy to see why: a large number of China’s plans appear to be failing or backfiring. Many of China’s neighbors are drawing closer to Washington, and its economy is faltering. The country’s confrontational “Wolf Warrior” style of diplomacy may have pleased Xi, but it won China few friends overseas. And polls indicate that Beijing is broadly unpopular worldwide: A 2023 Pew Research Center study, for example, surveyed attitudes toward China and the United States in 24 countries on six continents. It found that only 28 percent of respondents had a favorable opinion of Beijing, and

just 23 percent said China contributes to global peace. Nearly 60 percent of respondents, by contrast, had a positive view of the United States, and 61 percent said Washington contributes to peace and stability.

But Xi's vision is far more formidable than it seems. China's proposals would give power to the many countries that have been frustrated and sidelined by the present order, but it would still afford the states Washington currently favors with valuable international roles. Beijing's initiatives are backed by a comprehensive, well-resourced, and disciplined operational strategy—one that features outreach to governments and people in seemingly every country. These techniques have gained Beijing newfound support, particularly in some multilateral organizations and from nondemocracies. China is succeeding in making itself an agent of welcome change while portraying the United States as the defender of a status quo that few particularly like.

Rather than dismissing Beijing's playbook, U.S. policymakers should learn from it. To win what will be a long-term competition, the United States must seize the mantle of change that China has claimed. Washington needs to articulate and push forward its own vision for a transformed international system and the U.S. role within that system—one that is inclusive of countries at different economic levels and with different political systems. Like China, the

United States needs to invest deeply in the technological, military, and diplomatic foundations that enable both security at home and leadership abroad. Yet as the country commits to that competition, U.S. policymakers must understand that near-term stabilization of the bilateral relationship advances rather than hinders ultimate U.S. objectives. They should build on last year's summit between President Joe Biden and Xi, curtailing inflammatory anti-Chinese rhetoric and creating a more functional diplomatic relationship. That way, the United States can focus on the more important task: winning the long-term game.

I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

Beijing's playbook begins with a well-defined vision of a transformed world order. The Chinese government wants a system built not just on multipolarity but also on absolute sovereignty; security rooted in international consensus and the UN Charter; state-determined human rights based on each country's circumstances; development as the "master key" to all solutions; the end of U.S. dollar dominance; and a pledge to leave no country and no one behind. This vision, in Beijing's telling, stands in stark contrast to the system the United States supports. In a 2023 report, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed Washington was "clinging to the Cold War mentality" and "piecing together small blocs through its alliance system" to "create division in the region, stoke confrontation and undermine peace." The United States, the

report continued, interferes “in the internal affairs of other countries,” uses the dollar’s status as the international reserve currency to coerce “other countries into serving America’s political and economic strategy,” and seeks to “deter other countries’ scientific, technological and economic development.” Finally, the ministry argued, the United States advances “cultural hegemony.” The “real weapons in U.S. cultural expansion,” it declared, were the “production lines of Mattel Company and Coca-Cola.”

Beijing claims that its vision, by contrast, advances the interests of the majority of the world’s people. China is center stage, but every country, including the United States, has a role to play. At the 2024 Munich Security Conference in February, for example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China and the United States are responsible for global strategic stability. China and Russia, meanwhile, represent the exploration of a new model for major-country relations. China and the European Union are the world’s two major markets and civilizations and should resist establishing blocs based on ideology. And China, as what Wang called the “largest developing country,” promotes solidarity and cooperation with the global South to increase its representation in global affairs.

China’s vision is designed to be compelling for nearly all countries. Those that are not democracies will have their choices validated. Those that are democracies but not major powers will gain a greater

voice in the international system and a bigger share of the benefits of globalization. Even the major democratic powers can reflect on whether the current system is adequate for meeting today's challenges or whether China has something better to offer.

Observers in the United States and elsewhere may roll their eyes at the grandiose phrasing, but they do so at their peril: dissatisfaction with the current international order has created a global audience more amenable to China's proposals than might have existed not long ago.

FOUR PILLARS

For over two decades, China has referred to a “new security concept” that embraces norms such as common security, system diversity, and multipolarity. But in recent years, China believes it has acquired the capability to advance its vision. To that end, during his first decade in power, Xi released three distinct global programs: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in 2021, and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022. Each contributes in some way to furthering both the transformation of the international system and China's centrality within it.

The BRI was initially a platform for Beijing to address the hard infrastructure needs of emerging and middle-income economies while making use of the Chinese construction industry's overcapacity. It has since expanded to become an engine of Beijing's

geostrategy: embedding China's digital, health, and clean technology ecosystems globally; promoting its development model; expanding the reach of its military and police forces; and advancing the use of its currency.

The GDI focuses on global development more broadly, and it places China squarely in the driver's seat. Often working with the UN, it supports small-scale projects that address poverty alleviation, digital connectivity, climate change, and health and food security. It advances Beijing's preference for economic development as a foundation for human rights. One government document on the program, for instance, accuses other countries of the "marginalization of development issues by emphasizing human rights and democracy."

Beijing has positioned the GSI as a system for, as several Chinese scholars have put it, providing "Chinese wisdom and Chinese solutions" to promote "world peace and tranquility." In Xi's words, the GSI advocates that countries "reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation." The better course, according to Xi, entails building a "balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture" that resolves differences between countries through dialogue and consultation and that upholds noninterference in others' internal affairs. Behind the rhetoric, the GSI is designed to end U.S. alliance

systems, establish security as a precondition for development, and promote absolute sovereignty and indivisible security—or the notion that one state’s safety should not come at the expense of others’. China and Russia have used this notion to justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that Moscow’s attack was needed to stop an expanding NATO from threatening Russia.

But Xi’s strategy has taken flight only in the past year, with the release of the Global Civilization Initiative in May 2023. The GCI advances the idea that countries with different civilizations and levels of development will have different political and economic models. It asserts that states determine rights and that no one country or model has a mandate to control the discourse of human rights. As former Foreign Minister Qin Gang put it: “There is no one-size-fits-all model in the protection of human rights.” Thus, Greece, with its philosophical and cultural traditions and level of development, may have a different conception and practice of human rights than China does. Both are equally valid.

Chinese leaders are working hard to get countries and international institutions to buy into their world vision. Their strategy is multilevel: striking deals with individual countries, integrating their initiatives or components of them into multilateral organizations, and embedding their proposals into global governance institutions. The BRI is the model for this approach. Around 150 countries have

become members of the program, which openly advocates for the values that frame China's vision—such as the primacy of development, sovereignty, state-directed political rights, and common security. This bilateral dealmaking has been accompanied by Chinese officials' efforts to link the BRI to other regional development efforts, such as the Master Plan on Connectivity 2025 created by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

China has also successfully embedded the BRI in more than two dozen UN agencies and programs. It has worked particularly diligently to align the BRI and the UN's high-profile 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which has been headed by a Chinese official for over a decade, produced a report on the BRI's support for the agenda. The report was partially funded by the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, which, in turn, was initially established by a \$200 million Chinese pledge. Such support undoubtedly contributes to the enthusiasm many senior UN officials, including the secretary-general, have shown for the BRI.

Progress on the GDI, GSI, and GCI has understandably been more nascent. Thus far, only a handful of leaders from countries such as Serbia, South Africa, South Sudan, and Venezuela have offered rhetorical support for the GCI's notion that the diversity of civilizations and development paths should be respected—and by

extension, for China's vision for an order that does not give primacy to the values of liberal democracies.

The GDI has gained more international support than the GCI. After Xi announced the project before the UN General Assembly, China developed a "Group of Friends of the GDI" that now boasts more than 70 countries. The GDI has advanced 50 projects and pledged 100,000 training opportunities for officials and experts from other countries to travel to China and study its systems. These training opportunities are designed to promote China's advanced technologies, its management experiences, and its development model. China has also succeeded in formally linking the GDI to the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and held GDI-related seminars with the UN Office for South-South Cooperation. Beijing, in other words, is weaving the program into the fabric of the international governmental system.

The GSI has achieved even greater rhetorical buy-in. According to China's Foreign Ministry, more than 100 countries, regional organizations, and international organizations have supported the GSI, and Chinese officials have encouraged the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), ASEAN, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to adopt the concept. At the SCO's September 2022 meeting, China advanced the GSI and received support from all the members except India and Tajikistan.

MASS APPEAL

China, in contrast with the United States, invests heavily in the diplomatic resources necessary to market its initiatives. It has more embassies and representative offices around the globe than any other country, and Chinese diplomats frequently speak at conferences and publish a stream of articles about China's various initiatives in local news outlets.

This diplomatic apparatus is supported by equally sprawling Chinese media networks. China's international news network, CGTN, has twice as many overseas bureaus as CNN, and Xinhua, the official Chinese news service, has over 180 bureaus globally. Although Chinese media are often perceived in the West as little more than crude propaganda tools, they can advance a positive image of China and its leadership. In a study published in 2024, a team of international scholars surveyed more than 6,000 respondents in 19 countries to see whether China or the United States was more effective at selling its political and economic model and its role as a global leader. At baseline, participants overwhelmingly preferred the United States—83 percent of the interviewees preferred the U.S. political model, 70 percent preferred the U.S. economic model, and 78 percent preferred U.S. leadership. But when they were exposed to Chinese media messaging—whether only to China's or to Chinese and U.S. government messaging in a head-to-head competition—participants preferred the Chinese models to those of the United

States.

Beijing also draws heavily on the strength of state-owned companies and the country's private sector to promote its objectives. China's technology firms, for instance, not only provide digital connectivity to a variety of countries; they also enable states to emulate elements of Beijing's political model. According to Freedom House, representatives from 36 countries have participated in Chinese government training sessions on how to control media and information on the Internet. In Zambia, adopting a "China way" for Internet governance—as a former government minister described it—resulted in the imprisonment of several Zambians for criticizing the president online. German Council on Foreign Relations experts revealed that Huawei middleboxes blocked websites in 17 countries. The more states adopt Chinese norms and technologies that suppress political and civil liberties, the more Beijing can undermine the current international system's embrace of universal human rights.

In addition, Xi has enhanced the role of China's security apparatus as a diplomatic tool. China's People's Liberation Army is conducting exercises with a growing number of countries and offering training to militaries throughout the developing world. Last year, for example, China brought more than 100 senior military officials from almost 50 African countries and the African Union to Beijing for

the third China-Africa Peace and Security Forum. China and the African participants agreed to hold more joint military exercises, and they embraced the BRI and the GSI, alongside the African Union's Agenda 2063 development plan, as a way to pursue economic development, promote peace, and ensure stability on the continent. Together, these arrangements help create the collaborative security system China wants: one that's based on Beijing.

China has boosted its strategy by being both patient and opportunistic. Beijing provides massive resources for its initiatives, reassuring other countries of its long-term support and enabling Chinese officials to act quickly when opportunities arise. For example, Beijing first announced a version of the Health Silk Road in 2015, but it garnered little attention. In 2020, however, China used the COVID-19 pandemic to breathe new life into the project. Xi delivered a major address before the World Health Assembly promoting China as a hub for medical resources. Beijing paired Chinese provinces with different countries and had the former send personal protective equipment and medical professionals to the latter. China also used the pandemic to push Chinese digital health technologies and traditional Chinese medicine—a priority for Xi—as ways to treat the virus.

More recently, China has used Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the

resulting Western sanctions to push de-dollarizing the global economy. China's trade with Russia is now mostly settled in renminbi, and Beijing is working through the BRI and multilateral organizations, such as the BRICS (which 34 countries have expressed interest in joining), to advance de-dollarization. As Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said during a 2023 visit to China, "Every night I ask myself why all countries have to base their trade on the dollar. Why can't we do trade based on our own currencies?"

THE PAYOFF

Beijing has clearly made progress in gaining rhetorical buy-in from other countries, as well as from UN organizations and officials. But in terms of effecting actual change on the ground, garnering support from other countries' citizens, and influencing the reform of international institutions, China's record is more mixed.

The GDI, for its part, is well on its way. A two-year progress report produced by the Xinhua News Agency's think tank indicated that 20 percent of the GDI's initial 50 cooperation programs had been completed, and an additional 200 had been proposed. Some projects are highly local and long term, but others will have a greater immediate impact, such as a wind power project in Kazakhstan that will meet the energy needs of more than one million households.

Despite the relative nascence of the GSI, Wang, China's foreign

minister, quickly claimed that the Beijing-brokered 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia was an example of the GSI's principle of promoting dialogue. China has had less success, however, using GSI principles in its attempts to resolve the war in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, some countries have expressed concern that the GSI is a kind of military alliance. Despite being an early beneficiary of GDI projects, for example, Nepal has resisted multiple Chinese entreaties to join the GSI because it does not want to be part of any security alliance.

The BRI has transformed the geostrategic and economic landscape throughout much of Africa, Southeast Asia, and, increasingly, Latin America. Huawei, for example, provides 70 percent of all the components in Africa's 4G telecommunications infrastructure. In addition, China's 2023 BRI investments have increased from 2022. There are signs, however, that the BRI's influence may be plateauing. Italy, the biggest economy in the initiative (aside from China itself), withdrew in December, and only 23 leaders attended the 2023 Belt and Road Forum, compared with 37 in 2019. China's financing for the BRI has fallen sharply since its peak in 2016, and many BRI recipient countries are struggling to repay Beijing's loans.

Public opinion polls paint a similarly mixed picture. The Pew poll indicated that middle-income economies, particularly in Africa and Latin America, are more likely to have positive views of China and

its contributions to stability than higher-income economies in Asia and Europe. But even in these regions, popular views of China are far from uniformly positive.

A 2023 survey of 1,308 elites in ASEAN states, for instance, reveals that although China is considered the most influential economic and security actor in the region, majorities in every country, except Brunei, express concern over China's rising influence. Pluralities or majorities in seven of ten countries do not believe that the GSI will benefit their region. And when asked whether they would align with China or with the United States if forced to choose, majorities in seven of ten ASEAN countries selected the United States.

Afrobarometer's 2019 and 2020 surveys suggest China has a more positive reputation in Africa: 63 percent of Africans polled in 34 countries believe China is a positive external influence. But only 22 percent believe China is the best model for future development, and approval of China's model declined from the 2014 and 2015 surveys.

A 2021 survey of 336 opinion leaders from 23 countries in Latin America was similarly telling. Although 78 percent of respondents believe China's overall influence in the region is high, only 35 percent have a good or very good opinion of China. (Respondents have similar opinions about the United States.) There was support for engagement with China on trade and foreign direct investment

but minimal support for engagement on multilateral cooperation, international security, and human rights.

Finally, support for China and Chinese-backed initiatives in the United Nations is mixed. For example, a detailed study of China's Digital Silk Road investment in Africa found that although eight African DSR members supported China's New IP proposal for increasing state control over the Internet, more African DSR members did not write in support of it. And the February 2023 vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine—in which 141 countries voted in favor, seven voted against, and 32, including China and all other members of the SCO except Russia, abstained—suggests widespread rejection of the GSI's principle of indivisible security. Nonetheless, China won the support of 25 of the 31 emerging and middle-income countries (not including itself) in the UN Human Rights Council in a successful bid to prevent debate on Beijing's treatment of its Uyghur minority population. It was only the second time in the council's history that a debate has been blocked.

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

Support for China's efforts may appear shallow among many segments of the international community. But China's leaders express great confidence in their transformative vision, and there is significant momentum behind the basic principles and policies proposed in the GDI, GSI, and GCI among members of BRICS

and the SCO, as well as among nondemocracies and African countries. China's wins within bigger organizations—such as the UN—may seem minor, but they are accumulating, giving Beijing substantial authority inside major institutions that many emerging and middle-income economies value. And Beijing has a formidable operational strategy for achieving its desired transformation, along with the capability to coordinate policy at multiple levels of government over a long period.

Part of why Beijing's efforts are catching on is that the present, U.S.-led system is unpopular in much of the world. It does not have a good record of meeting global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, debt crises, or food shortages—all of which disproportionately affect the planet's most vulnerable people. Many countries believe that the United Nations and its institutions, including the Security Council, do not adequately reflect the world's distribution of power. The international system has also not proved capable of resolving long-standing conflicts or preventing new ones. And the United States is increasingly viewed as operating outside the very institutions and norms it helped create: deploying widespread sanctions without Security Council approval, helping weaken international bodies such as the World Trade Organization, and, during the Trump administration, withdrawing from global agreements. Finally, Washington's periodic framing of the world system as one divided between autocracies and democracies

alienates many countries, including some democratic ones.

Even if its vision is not fully realized, unless the world has a credible alternative, China can take advantage of this dissatisfaction to make significant progress in materially degrading the current international system. The uphill battle the United States has waged to persuade countries to avoid Huawei telecommunications equipment is an important lesson in addressing a problem before it arises. It would be far more difficult to overturn a global order that has devalued universal human rights in favor of state-determined rights, significantly de-dollarized the financial system, widely embedded state-controlled technology systems, and deconstructed U.S.-led military alliances.

The United States should therefore move aggressively to position itself as a force for system change. It should take a page from China's playbook and be opportunistic—seeking strategic advantage as China's economy is faltering and its political system is under stress. It should acknowledge that, as Xi has repeatedly said, there are changes in the world “the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years” but make clear that these shifts do not signal the decline of the United States. Instead, they are in line with Washington's own dynamic vision for the future.

The vision should begin by advancing an economic and technological revolution that will transform the world's digital,

energy, agricultural, and health landscapes in ways that are inclusive and contribute to shared global prosperity. This will require new norms and institutions that integrate emerging and middle-income economies into resilient and diversified global supply chains, innovation networks, clean manufacturing ecosystems, and information and data governance regimes. Washington should promote a global conversation on its vision of technologically advanced change rooted in high standards, the rule of law, transparency, official accountability, and sustainability—norms of shared good governance that are not ideologically laden. Such a discussion would likely be widely popular, just as China’s focus on the imperative of development holds broad appeal.

Washington has put in place some of the building blocks of this vision through the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment. Largely left out of the equation, however, are precisely the states most open to China’s vision of transformation—most members of the BRICS, the SCO, and nondemocratic emerging and middle-income economies. Together with these countries, Washington should explore regional arrangements akin to those it has established with its Asian and European partners. More countries should be brought into the networks Washington is establishing to build stronger supply chains, such as those created by the CHIPS and Science Act. And countries

such as Cambodia and Laos, left out of relevant existing arrangements such as the Indo-Pacific framework, should be given a path to membership. This would expand the United States' development footprint, allowing it to provide a development trajectory that is different from Beijing's BRI and GDI and—unlike China's initiatives—offers participating countries an opportunity to help develop the rules of the road.

Artificial intelligence presents a unique opportunity for the United States to signal a new, more inclusive approach. As its full applications become appreciated, AI will require new international norms and potentially new institutions to harness its positive effects and limit its negative ones. The United States, which is the world's leading AI innovator, should engage up front with countries other than its traditional allies and partners to develop regulations. Joint U.S.-EU efforts regarding skills training for the next generation of AI jobs, for example, should be expanded to include the global majority. The United States can also support engagement between its robust private sector and civil society organizations and their counterparts in other countries—a multistakeholder approach that China, with its “head of state” style of diplomacy, typically eschews.

This effort will require Washington to draw more effectively on the U.S. private sector and civil society—much as China has worked its state-owned enterprises and private sector into the BRI and GDI—

by fostering vibrant, state-initiated but business-and-civil-society-driven international partnerships. In most of the world, including Africa and Latin America, the United States is a larger and more desired source of foreign direct investment and assistance than China. And Washington has left untapped a significant alignment of interests between its strategic goals and the economic objectives of the private sector, such as creating political and economic environments abroad that enable U.S. companies to flourish. Because American companies and foundations are private actors, however, the benefits of their investments do not redound to the U.S. government. Institutionalizing public-private partnerships can better link U.S. objectives with the strength of the American private sector and help ensure that initiatives are not cast aside during political transitions in Washington. The work of private foundations in the United States—which invest billions of dollars in emerging economies and middle-income countries—should similarly be amplified by American officials and lifted up through partnerships with Washington.

More inclusive global governance also requires that Washington consider potential tradeoffs as other countries' economies and militaries grow relative to those of the United States. In the near term, for example, a clearer delineation of the limits of U.S. sanctions policy could help slow the momentum behind Beijing's de-dollarization effort. But Washington should use this time to

assess the viability of the dollar's dominance over the longer term and consider what steps, if any, U.S. officials should take to try to preserve it. Washington's vision may also need to incorporate reforms to the current alliance system. The hard realities of China's growing military prowess and its economic support for Russia during the latter's war against Ukraine make clear that Washington and its allies must think anew about the security structures necessary to manage a world in which Beijing and its like-minded partners operate as soft, and potentially hard, military allies.

As with China, the United States needs to spend more on the foundations of its competitiveness and national security to succeed over the long term. Although defensive policies are often necessary, they grant only short-term protections. This means Washington must staff up to match Beijing's foreign policy apparatus. Around 30 U.S. embassies and missions have no sitting U.S. ambassador; each of these slots must be filled. The United States has taken the first steps to enhance its economic competitiveness with programs such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, but it needs sustained investment in research and development and advanced manufacturing. It also needs to adopt immigration policies that attract and retain top talent from around the world. And Washington needs to recommit to investing in the foundations of its long-term military capabilities and modernization. Without bipartisan support for the basic building blocks of American

competitiveness and global leadership, Beijing will continue to make headway in changing the global order.

Finally, to avoid unnecessary friction, the United States should continue to stabilize the U.S.-Chinese relationship by defining new areas for cooperation, expanding civil society engagement, tamping down needless hostile rhetoric, strategically managing its Taiwan policy, and developing a clear message on the economic tools it uses to protect U.S. economic and national security. This will enable the United States to maintain relations with those in China who are concerned about their country's current trajectory, as well as give Washington room to focus on building up its economic and military capabilities while moving forward with its own global vision.

China is right: the international system does need reform. But the foundations for that reform are best found in the openness, transparency, rule of law, and official accountability that are the hallmarks of the world's market democracies. The global innovation and creativity necessary to solve the world's challenges thrive best in open societies. Transparency, the rule of law, and official accountability are the foundation of healthy, sustained global economic growth. And the current system of alliances, although insufficient to ensure global peace and security, has helped prevent war from breaking out among the world's great powers for more than 70 years. China has not yet managed to convince a majority of

the planet's people that its intentions and capabilities are the ones needed to shape the twenty-first century. But it is up to the United States and its allies and partners to create an affirmative and compelling alternative.

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