

NUCLEAR ARMS AND PROLIFERATION

The United States and North Korea Are Edging Into Increasingly Dangerous Territory

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But there is still a way to avoid war, and it begins with talks between the two sides, not escalating threats.

“There’s battle lines being drawn,” Stephen Stills sang in the 1960s about the war in Vietnam. Today those same words can be applied to the escalating confrontation between the United States and North Korea over the latter’s nuclear-weapons and missile programs.

That conflict will be front and center when President Donald Trump pays his first state visits to Japan and South Korea in November. In Japan, where Prime Minister Shinzo Abe—Trump’s closest friend in the region—just won a smashing reelection victory, Trump will be honored with an audience with the country’s aging emperor and his usual golf game with the hawkish Abe.

But in Korea, where there is far more ambivalence about Trump’s policies, antiwar groups and unions—many of which backed President Moon Jae-in’s election campaign last spring—are planning major rallies to greet him. As a precursor to what’s to come, South Korean activists this week in the southern port of Pusan handed out leaflets reading “US Troops Go Home!” to US soldiers arriving for another round of military exercises with the South Korean military.

They have good reason to be concerned. Listening carefully to the Trump administration and the government of Kim Jong-un over the last week, it’s becoming increasingly clear that the two sides are trying to signal the limits of their policies—and their patience. Nobody is sure whether these statements are a prelude to the diplomacy long promised by Trump’s national-security team, or the opening salvos of what will be a bloody and destructive war if the situation explodes.

Trump, who appears to have stopped tweeting about Kim, is leaving the policy pronouncements to H.R. McMaster, his national-security adviser, and Mike Pompeo, his CIA director.

Both men have been warning for weeks about the possibility of a risky “preventive” war that would theoretically destroy North Korea’s nuclear and missile capability and—in a strategy known as “decapitation”—take out Kim and his military leadership team in Pyongyang. (As if to underscore that threat, a team from the Navy’s SEAL Team Six, which assassinated Osama bin Laden, was aboard the nuclear submarine USS *Michigan* as it participated in recent bilateral maritime drills with South Korea.)

Last week, in separate appearances before the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, McMaster and Pompeo made clear that Trump’s endgame is the termination of the North’s nuclear program, by any means necessary. Trump “is not going to accept this regime threatening the United States with a nuclear weapon,” McMaster told the organization, which has supplanted the American Enterprise Institute as the spiritual home of the neocons.

McMaster also ruled out the suggestion, made by some former US officials, that Trump should accept the North as a nuclear power, like Pakistan and Israel, and build a system of deterrence similar to the containment policies of the Cold War.

"Well, accept and deter is unacceptable," said McMaster, who first gained his fame as a counterinsurgency innovator in Iraq during the Bush "surge" of 2008. "And so, this puts us in a situation where we are in a race to resolve this short of military action." He repeated his bottom line twice: "The only acceptable objective is denuclearization."

Pompeo signaled that US intelligence has concluded that the North is closer than ever to building a capability to place a nuclear weapon on an ICBM and lob it great distances. "I expect they will be closer in five months than they are today, absent a global effort to push back against them," he said, adding that "from a US policy perspective, we ought to behave as if we are on the cusp of them achieving that objective."

He also argued that the United States viewed North Korea as a dangerous threat even if its rockets can't reach the continental United States. "There are enormous US interests in South Korea and Japan and in Asia, as well," he said, speaking of the vast string of US Navy, Air Force, and Marine bases that ring North Korea.

But, in an odd aside for a man threatening war, he added that "Intelligence isn't perfect, especially in a place like North Korea," making it possible that the United States could be "off by months or a couple of years in our understanding." ("Hell of a thing for anyone in this [administration] to be considering a first strike on North Korea while the CIA director notes intel 'isn't perfect,'" Ankit Panda, a senior editor at *The Diplomat*, tweeted in response.)

The intense focus by McMaster and Pompeo on military action has led many observers to wonder whether Trump has decided to abandon the negotiations promised since the beginning of the crisis by his top officials at the Pentagon and the State Department, James Mattis and Rex Tillerson.

In August, they co-authored a highly unusual op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* in which they essentially offered to open negotiations with Kim without preconditions, including the North's immediate abandonment of nuclear weapons. Talks were possible, they said, if Kim would "signal his desire to negotiate in good faith" by ceasing North Korea's tests and missile launches for a period of time. However, it's unclear that such an offer is on the table any longer, even as both Mattis and Tillerson continue to insist that diplomacy is their chosen route.

For its part, the North, which has recently taken to calling Trump "mentally deranged," has rejected the idea of total denuclearization and instead argued that the United States should make the "right choice" by recognizing it as a nuclear state. That would lead to a "way out" of the current standoff, Choe Son-hui, the director-general of the North American department of North Korea's foreign ministry, told a recent conference in Moscow attended by several Americans.

South Korean officials who were there told the Yonhap wire service that Choe stated that the North "will never give up its nuclear weapons as long as the US' hostile policy, including military activities, sanctions and pressure, continue." Further details of her speech were broadcast on the Russian-state media outlet RT.

"Our weapons are designed for the protection of our homeland from the constant nuclear threat from the US," Choe said, adding that her government "won't supply nuclear weapons to third parties, notwithstanding its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)." Moreover, "despite quitting NPT, we are committed to the idea of non-proliferation of our nuclear weapons."

Choe's emphasis on the United States' "hostile policy" offers a ray of hope, says Suzanne DiMaggio, a former United Nations official and a senior fellow at New America who spoke on the same Moscow panel as Choe. In a long string of tweets on October 23, DiMaggio wrote that "there is a 'way out.' The US needs to abandon its hostile policies" and "[s]top provocative military exercises & nuclear threats."

The United States' priority, DiMaggio added, should be to get talks underway by first engaging in bilateral "talks about talks," without preconditions, so both sides can "clarify positions" and "explore what's possible." And "while not abandoning denuclearization as [an] end goal," the United States "should set it aside" because "it's currently outside realm of possibility."

Instead, she urged that the Trump administration focus on "achievable" goals, such as deterrence and non-proliferation, and then "pursue talks to address" the policies the North considers hostile. While "this would be a longer, arduous discussion," involving a peace agreement and security guarantees, it's better than the alternative, she offered.

"We are in dangerous territory," warned DiMaggio, one of a group of former US officials and intelligence officers who met informally with North Korean officials from time to time, in her Twitter analysis. "In Washington policy making circles, talk of kinetic options is increasingly heard," she continued (kinetic is a term for lethal military operations). "The longer this course persists [or] intensifies, the greater the chances for spiraling into military conflict by design or miscalculation."

Tim Shorrock

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<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-united-states-and-north-korea-are-edging-into-increasingly-dangerous-territory/>

Diplomacy With North Korea Has Worked Before, and Can Work Again

The war hawks are wrong when they say that past negotiations, like the 1994 Agreed Framework, didn't make a difference.

August 2017 was a reminder of the scariest, and riskiest, days of the Cold War. All month long, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un engaged in a bitter war of words that escalated into tit-for-tat displays of military might and ended with mutual threats of mass destruction. The tensions peaked on September 3 with Pyongyang's stunning announcement that it had conducted its sixth, and largest, nuclear test—this time of a powerful hydrogen bomb—and had the capability to place the bomb onto an intercontinental ballistic missile. With the crisis spinning out of control, the opportunity for the diplomacy and negotiations promised by Trump's foreign-policy team in recent months seemed to fade with each passing day.

Ironically, the spiral of events began with a hopeful sign on August 15, when Kim uncharacteristically backed down from a highly publicized plan to launch ballistic missiles toward the United States garrison island of Guam. His surprise decision drew approving comments from Trump as well as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who has been at the forefront of US proposals for diplomacy. He offered that Kim's "restraint" might be enough to meet the US conditions for talks—a

halt to nuclear and missile tests—that he recently laid out in a Wall Street Journal op-ed co-authored with Defense Secretary James Mattis.

But Kim, who has said he will negotiate only if the United States ends its “hostile policy and nuclear threats,” had warned that he would reconsider his missile tests “if the Yankees persist in their extremely dangerous reckless actions.” He was speaking of the US–South Korean military exercises launched on August 21 that, according to press reports, included training runs for a preemptive strike against the North as well as a computerized nuclear war game. To counter this show of force, Pyongyang test-fired three short-range rockets and followed up with a medium-range missile shot over the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido.

Predictably, Kim’s moves sparked a US counter-action—a practice bombing run over Korean skies by Guam-based supersonic B1-B Lancer bombers, aided by four stealth F-35B advanced fighter jets flown from the US Marine base in Iwakuni, Japan. Days later, the North announced that it had developed a hydrogen bomb that could be placed on an ICBM—and, as mentioned, promptly tested the device in a massive underground explosion. Trump responded with a tweet denouncing the North as a “rogue” nation. He then insulted South Korea by calling President Moon Jae-in’s preference for engagement “appeasement,” apparently ruling out the diplomacy sought by his top advisers.

Mattis, who had told reporters the week before that “we’re never out of diplomatic solutions,” quickly assured the public that the administration was in lockstep on Korea. After an emergency meeting at the White House on Sunday, he went on camera to say that Trump would meet more threats with a “massive military response” that would be both “effective and overwhelming.” The United States, he added ominously, is “not looking for the total annihilation” of North Korea but only to end its nuclear program. United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley followed up on Monday, telling the UN Security Council that North Korea was “begging for war” and should be met with the “strongest possible sanctions.” But she left the door open for talks, saying “the time has come for us to exhaust all of our diplomatic means before it’s too late.”

As the gravity of the situation dawned on Washington, the thin reeds of reassurance from Mattis and Haley seemed to suggest that the path of diplomacy and negotiation remains open—barely. “I don’t think that this administration is ideologically opposed to negotiations,” Victor Cha, a former Bush administration official who is about to be named US ambassador to Seoul, told *The Nation* on Tuesday. But therein lies a major dilemma.

Talking to North Korea is a hard sell in Washington. The predominant view is that direct negotiations are a bad idea because, in the opinion of many officials and pundits, Pyongyang can’t be trusted. Exhibit One for these naysayers is the much-maligned “Agreed Framework” between President Bill Clinton and Kim’s father, Kim Jong-il, which ended the first nuclear crisis with Pyongyang in 1994 and was cited by 64 Democrats in a recent letter to Tillerson as a model for future talks.

“The Clinton administration negotiated that deal, and the North Korean government immediately violated it,” CNN’s John King confidently informed his viewers on July 5, just after the North test-fired an ICBM that could hit the United States. King’s view, which he repeated several times that day without providing a single shred of evidence, became the standard line on CNN and the rest of network television, which consistently blocks voices saying that engagement has worked in the past. This take has also become a mantra for advocates of tough sanctions and regime change.

“Engagement? I’ve been there, done that, and got the T-shirts—all of them failed,” Bruce Klingner, a former CIA official and senior research fellow for northeast Asia at the right-wing Heritage

Foundation, told a Washington forum last month of his brief contacts with North Korean officials. Even Christopher Hill, a former US ambassador to Seoul who negotiated the “Six-Party Talks” in 2007 and 2008 for the Bush administration, has jumped into the no-talks camp, proclaiming that further negotiations would only “strengthen a rogue regime’s hand.” Similar arguments were made by three former US officials in interviews with The New York Times last week.

But what if these calculations aren’t true, and the official story is wrong? What exactly did the Agreed Framework do, and how and why did it come apart? Did President Clinton’s agreement really give North Korea the bomb, as many Republicans now claim? What did those 64 Democrats mean when they urged Tillerson to “make a good faith effort to replicate” its successes? A careful review of the 1994 agreement and interviews with former US officials with extensive experience negotiating with Pyongyang reveals that blame for its demise should be equally shared by the United States and North Korea. Because that’s not a popular view, and the risks are so high, it’s important to get the story straight.

The 1994 agreement was the United States’ response to a regional political crisis that began that year when North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which requires non-nuclear states to agree never to develop or acquire nuclear weapons. Although it had no nuclear weapon, North Korea was producing plutonium, an action that almost led the United States to launch a preemptive strike against its plutonium facility.

That war was averted when Jimmy Carter made a surprise trip to Pyongyang and met with North Korea’s founder and leader at the time, Kim Il-sung (he died a few months later, and his power was inherited by his son, Kim Jong-il). The framework was signed in October 1994, ending “three years of on and off vilification, stalemates, brinkmanship, saber-rattling, threats of force, and intense negotiations,” Park Kun-young, a professor of international relations at Korea Catholic University, wrote in a 2009 history of the negotiations.

In addition to shutting its one operating reactor, Yongbyon, the North also stopped construction of two large reactors “that together were capable of generating 30 bombs’ worth of plutonium a year,” according to Leon V. Sigal, a former State Department official who helped negotiate the 1994 framework and directs a Northeast Asia security project at the Social Science Research Council in New York. Most important for the United States, it remained in the NPT.

In exchange for North Korea’s concessions, the United States agreed to provide 500,000 tons a year of heavy fuel oil to North Korea as well two commercial light-water reactors considered more “proliferation resistant” than the Soviet-era heavy-water facility the North was using. The new reactors were to be built in 2003 by a US/Japanese/South Korean consortium called the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, or KEDO. (The reactors, however, were never completed).

For Pyongyang, which had been in the economic wilderness since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the biggest prize was the US promise to stop treating the North like an enemy state. Specifically, the two sides agreed to move as rapidly as possible to full diplomatic and economic normalization. Here’s how it played out.

First, the Agreed Framework led North Korea to halt its plutonium-based nuclear-weapons program for over a decade, forgoing enough enrichment to make over 100 nuclear bombs. “What people don’t know is that North Korea made no fissionable material whatsoever from 1991 to 2003,” says Sigal. (The International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed in 1994 that the North had ceased production of plutonium three years earlier.) “A lot of this history” about North Korea, Sigal adds with a sigh, “is in the land of make-believe.”

Second, the framework remained in effect well into the Bush administration. In 1998, the State Department's Rust Deming testified to Congress that "there is no fundamental violation of any aspect of the framework agreement"; four years later, a similar pledge was made by Bush's then-Secretary of State Colin Powell. "I get really aggravated when I hear people in Congress say the agreement wasn't worth the paper it was printed on," says James Pierce, who was on the State Department team led by Robert Gallucci that negotiated the framework. "The bottom line is, there was a lot in the 1994 agreement that worked and continued for quite some years. The assertion, now gospel, that the North Koreans broke it right away is simply not true."

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Third, the framework and the ongoing engagement that resulted allowed the Clinton administration, led by Secretary of Defense William Perry, to launch a remarkable set of talks that nearly led to a final breakthrough with Pyongyang. As the negotiations unfolded, Kim Jong-il made a startling offer: In return for an end to enmity, Pyongyang was prepared to shut down its development, testing, and deployment of all medium- and long-range missiles. But the agreement was never completed. (Wendy Sherman, the top deputy to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, later wrote that the two sides were "tantalizingly close.") "In effect, they were willing to trade their missile program for a better relationship" with Washington, Sigal told me. "And this was before they had the nukes!"

Fourth, the United States itself may have violated the framework by delaying the most important part of the agreement for Pyongyang—US oil shipments and the full normalization of political and economic relations. By 1997, Sigal recalls, the North Koreans were complaining bitterly that the United States was slow to deliver its promised oil and stalling on its pledge to end its hostile policies—the very reason Kim Jong-il had signed in the first place. In a House hearing in 1998, Gallucci warned of failure unless the US government did "what it said it would do, which is to take responsibility" for delivery of the oil. "It was against this backdrop—Pyongyang's growing conviction the US was not living up to its commitments—that the North in 1998 began to explore" other military options, Mike Chinoy, a former CNN reporter and the author of *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, wrote recently in an incisive article in *The Cipher Brief*.

Finally, the framework collapsed in 2003 after the Bush administration—which had come to office with grave doubts about the agreement—dredged up US intelligence from the 1990s to accuse the North of starting a highly enriched uranium program as a second avenue to the bomb. (It hadn't yet, though it was scouting the world for enrichment machinery to use later.) Bush tore up the framework agreement, exacerbating the deterioration in relations he had sparked a year earlier when he named North Korea part of his "axis of evil" in January 2002. In response, the North kicked out the IAEA inspectors and began building what would become its first bomb, in 2006, triggering a second nuclear crisis that continues to this day. "I think they were [cheating] to hedge their bets because we were cheating too," Lawrence Wilkerson, the chief of staff to Colin Powell in 2002, recently told *The Real News*.

In other words, the full story is complicated, and blame can easily be cast on both sides. But the results were disastrous, as Sigal summarized in his masterful history of US-North Korean negotiations published last year by the Korean Institute for National Unification and Columbia Law School.

"When President Bush took office, North Korea, thanks to diplomacy, had stopped testing longer-range missiles," he wrote. "It had less than a bomb's worth of plutonium and was verifiably not making more. Six years later, as a result of Washington's broken promises and financial sanctions, it

had seven to nine bombs' worth [of plutonium], had resumed longer-range test launches, and felt free to test nuclear weapons." Since then, he noted in a recent commentary, "any achievements have been temporary" because "neither side kept its commitments or sustained negotiations."

In fact, the situation worsened during the Obama administration, which never got negotiations back on track despite Obama's promises during his 2008 campaign that he would talk to North Korea's leaders. Trump is dealing with the residue of these failed policies, and seemed to grasp that when he reluctantly endorsed the idea of direct talks on August 9. "They've been negotiating now for 25 years," he told reporters. "Look at Clinton. He folded on the negotiations. He was weak and ineffective. You look what happened with Bush, you look what happened with Obama. Obama, he didn't even want to talk about it. But I talk. It's about time. Somebody has to do it."

Trump's facts, as usual, are off the mark—but his conclusion that talks are necessary is sound. To conduct them, however, his administration will have to deal with the same political attacks that helped sink the Agreed Framework. And then, as now, the opposition is likely to come from foreign policy hardliners who don't believe that diplomacy has ever worked with North Korea.

Most histories of the Agreed Framework overlook a critical fact: one month after it was signed, the GOP captured Congress for the first time in four decades. "No sooner had the agreement been concluded than the Republicans took control of the House and Senate, putting it in jeopardy," Sigal wrote in his history. Even before the ink was dry, Newt Gingrich and other party leaders, notably Senator John McCain, were attacking the framework as a sellout that would essentially bribe North Korea to follow international law on nuclear proliferation and put the United States at further risk. "We're going back to the days of President Carter, of appeasement," McCain told The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour in October 1994.

Over the course of the agreement, the GOP delayed critical funding for KEDO and the fuel oil, forcing the Clinton administration to seek funds elsewhere and significantly delaying shipments—"in some cases for years," says Chinoy. That created difficulties for the US diplomats who were directly involved with the North Koreans in implementing its terms, recalls Pierce, who spent many days in Pyongyang working with North Korean officials to monitor where the fuel oil was flowing after it reached the North. "We scraped [the funds] together, because we knew we weren't going to get any more money from Congress," he says. "But we had to deliver on our side."

The North Korean government, well aware that Congress and the executive had equal power, viewed these delays as an abrogation of the agreements made in 1994. Yet despite its anger, the government of Kim Jong-il, who consolidated power shortly after his father's death, made no attempt to reprocess the spent fuel that was stored under IAEA inspection at Yongbyon or to restart the reactor. But as a defensive measure, Pyongyang started to build medium- and long-range missiles, which had never been part of the negotiations. By 1997 it had tested two of them, causing shivers of fear at the Pentagon.

In 1998, in a desperate attempt to persuade the United States to end its hostile policy, North Korea offered to put its missile program on the table for negotiations. When Clinton demurred, Pyongyang launched a three-stage rocket called the Taepodong in a botched attempt to put a satellite into space. This led Clinton to appoint Defense Secretary Perry his envoy to Pyongyang to begin the missile negotiations that came close to ending the standoff.

A key factor in Kim Jong-il's decision to re-enter negotiations was the progress he had made in lowering tensions with South Korea's president, Kim Dae-jung. Since winning office in 1996, the South's former opposition leader had championed a new "Sunshine Policy" toward the North that sought to end the country's division through economic, political, and cultural engagement. In 2000,

in an extraordinary scene that gave hope to millions of Koreans on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the two Kims met for the first intra-Korea summit meeting in history and declared that their peninsula would be nuclear-free.

Those developments gave impetus to the US-North Korean talks. Not long after the North-South summit, Marshal Jo Myong-rok, a high-ranking North Korean who was Kim's second-in-command, visited Washington, DC, and met President Clinton and other top US officials at the White House. They signed a joint communiqué designed to end US-North Korean tensions once and for all, and pledged to begin talks to "formally improve" bilateral relations, including replacing the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War with "permanent peace arrangements," according to Sigal. Soon after, Albright flew to Pyongyang to meet with Kim.

The missile deal—including Kim's commitment to end all production and testing—was to be capped with a visit to Pyongyang by Clinton himself. But he never made the trip, largely because his advisers kept him in Washington during the legal imbroglio that shook America over the disputed 2000 election between Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush. The agreement was never signed, although North Korea's missile moratorium lasted until 2007. "That was the moment when everything could have gone differently," Perry told *The New York Times* in a recent podcast about the 1999 talks.

Then came the neocons, and talks went out the window. "Under President Bush, the clock was turned back, the [Agreed Framework] became a Clinton mistake, something to be voided and then abolished," wrote Park, the professor of international relations at Korea Catholic University.

Chief among the framework opponents was Donald Rumsfeld, Bush's defense secretary. During the Clinton years, he had chaired a national commission on missile defense that identified North Korea and Iran as dangerous "rogue states" that necessitated tough policies and, of course, a robust missile-defense system. Meanwhile, at the State Department, John Bolton, also a die-hard opponent, sharply criticized the terms of the framework as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control. (Today he says that the United States can only eliminate North Korea's nuclear program by "eliminating North Korea.")

Early on in his administration, Bush signaled his displeasure with Clinton's Korea diplomacy when he met at the White House with Kim Dae-jung. Kim, still basking in the glow of his 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il, hoped to convince Bush that negotiations should continue. But he was humiliated when the president told him, on live television, that he did not trust North Korea and would not endorse Kim's "Sunshine Policy."

A few months later, when pragmatists at State under Colin Powell decided after a review to restart talks with Pyongyang, the hard-liners—led by Bolton—seized on the uranium "discovery" from 1998 to scuttle the framework. "I wanted a decisive conclusion that the Agreed Framework was dead," Bolton later explained.

In October 2002, Bush sent James Kelly, a deputy assistant secretary of state, to Pyongyang to deliver an ultimatum to North Korea. He had strict orders from Vice President Dick Cheney and Bolton not to negotiate in any way—a dictate he followed even after his North Korean interlocutors denied that they had a uranium program in place but offered to discuss the accusations. "Kelly had minders from both the VP's office and John Bolton's staff," recalls John Merrill, the former chief of the northeast Asia division of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department. "He had absolutely no room too explore the issue. Instead, he took what they said as an admission that they had a program and went home."

According to this account, the North Koreans told Kelly that the country had a “right” to a uranium program but was willing to discuss the issue as part of the broader negotiations over missiles. But the hard-liners in the administration rejected the offer and decided to terminate the framework. Within months, Pyongyang had thrown out the IAEA inspectors, withdrawn from the NPT, restarted Yongbyon, and was on its way to its first bomb.

Condoleezza Rice, in her memoirs about her experience in Bush’s government, described the US refusal to talk to the North Koreans about the highly enriched uranium program, or HEU, as a huge mistake. “Because [Kelly’s] instructions were so constraining, Jim couldn’t fully explore what might have been an opening to put the [nuclear] program on the table,” she wrote. Later, when she ran for president in 2008, Hillary Clinton picked up on this theme, blasting the Bush administration for using the HEU program as an excuse to abrogate the Agreed Framework. “There is no debate that, once the [framework] was torn up, the North Koreans began to process plutonium with a vengeance because all bets were off,” she told The Washington Post.

Tim Shorrock

* The Nation. SEPTEMBER 2 2017:

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