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To creation discourse by the press: Neo-Ottoman discourse

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Abstract — This study stems from a leading article published in the British daily, The Independent (2 June 2012): It is time for Turkey to take the lead on Syria. This article argued that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan "set too much store by the laudatory press clippings about the rise of the new Ottomans and exaggerated his government's influence in Damascus." This argument is very important for Turkey's foreign policy. The term "Neo-Ottoman" depicts a foreign policy that draws part of its legitimacy from Turkey's experience as a once imperial power in its wider neighbourhood. Social and political life acquires its meaning through discourse, especially through the articulation of meaning and identities. The process of establishing meaning is a political process, entangled by pluralism and struggles for power. Post-marxsist discourse theory uses political power to fix the meaning of a subject and refers this process as articulation. The argument in this paper looks into the effect of the national and international press on political communication; more precisely, into how the "Neo-Ottoman" discourse was projected in the press, production and reproduction of neo-ottoman vision and how it was brought to the forefront by the international media in assessment of Turkey's foreign policy. Therefore, we will be focusing on different views of prominent national and international figures illustrating their views on this issue. While doing so, we will cover articles published in Turkey, the Middle East, Europe and the USA.

Keywords — discourse, neo-ottoman, international press

1. Introduction

Turkey, being at its heart for over 600 years, the multi-cultural Ottoman Empire, at its height of power in the 16th and 17th centuries, covered a large part of south eastern Europe, south western Asia, and North Africa. With its decline in the 19th century, the Empire had mostly been in an effort to modernize itself and establish alliances with Western countries. Its participation in World War I with Germany signalled a deathblow on the Empire's existence in the aftermath of the Allied victory, it was carved up leading to the creation of several nations, and later crumbled completely and ceased to exist.

The Ottoman Empire lasted from the decline of the Byzantine Empire in the fourteenth century until the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Present-day Turkey sits at the heart of the old Ottoman Empire, whose imperial capital was also located in Istanbul. The empire grew as the lands of Byzantium and beyond were conquered, eventually including the countries of the Balkan Peninsula; the islands of the eastern Mediterranean; parts of Hungary and Russia; Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, Palestine, Egypt; parts of Arabia; and North Africa through to Algeria. Turkey was created on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. Turkey of today is now returning to neo-Ottomanism. The Republic of Turkey, through its new national narrative, sought to actively remove and replace everything once considered Ottoman. After the death of Atatürk in 1938, the Turkish Republic witnessed several serious tests of survival. Following public demands for more democracy, Turkey moved into the pluralist system of democracy in the 1950s. Sadly, it failed this test of democracy and was unable to prevent three Military coups between the years of 1960-1982.

Actually, Neo-Ottomanism, as an intellectual movement and a foreign policy strategy, is not a new concept in Turkey. The first such "neo-Ottoman" to suggest that there is more to Turkish identity than the one accounted for by the official state was Adnan Menderes. Chosen as the Turkish prime minister soon after the first real multi-party elections in 1950, Menderes began to reemphasize the importance of Muslim identity to the Turks. He began shifting Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle-East as much as the West. Though popular and elected three times, he was unable to escape the gallows after being disposed by the Turkish military in 1960. Menderes was eventually pardoned, but controversy still exists as to how much irreparable damage his populist, neo-Ottomanist policies inflicted on the Turkish Republic (Mango, 2004).

After the years Neo-Ottoman discourse was relieved by Turgut Özal. Turgut Özal, elected as the Turkish Prime Minister and President in the 1980s, differed from Menderes and his policies, he too believed in the importance of discovering the Ottoman roots of the Turkish society. Ottomanism has been reproduced with Özal's Neo-Ottoman rhetoric. Özal enacted various cultural and social policies that all aimed at re-introducing the non-political elements of the Ottoman Empire (Laciner, 2009). Since that period, the Turkish body politics has increasingly embraced the philosophy of neo-Ottomanism. In 1993, Candar told the Washington Post, 'I think Kemalism makes Turkey turn in on itself. The time has come to reconsider the policy'. A decade later, Ali Bayramoglu (2004) in the Islamist daily Yeni Safak, wrote that the partisans of 'neo-Ottomanism . . . are increasing every day'.

All Turkish governments between 1923 and 2002 gave priority to Western partners over the Middle East in their international relations. The reason for this was that Turkey's "new republican elites" regarded themselves as European, or as part of the Western world, and not as Middle Eastern. They therefore identified themselves with western political, economic and security institutions such as NATO, the OECD and more recently the EU. Consequently, Turkey took a different path from that of most Middle Eastern states. With Turkey recently having become increasingly influential over other

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countries in the region, a discourse of "neo-Ottomanism" has emerged. The rise of Turkey's importance and likely influence in the new post-Soviet Turkish space was framed as neo-Ottomanism, an intellectual argument among some segments of the Turkish political elite who contended that Turkey had enormous advantages in its geography and thus should pursue a proactive foreign policy. The course of Turkey that continues to be active in the Middle East, the Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, Europe, and even in Africa seems like corresponding to the discourse of "The Neo- Ottoman".

The Neo-Ottomanists believed that Turkey should use its advantages and power to promote its interests in the former Ottoman and newly emerged post-Soviet Turkish space and strengthen its strategies relations with the western world, particularly with the US (Özkan, 2010). The neo-Ottomanist foreign policy discourse began to be reiterated in 2002 There are various other domestic and international reasons for the revival of the neo-ottomanist foreign policy conversations of Turkey, such as the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power and the outcomes of September 11 terrorists attack on the US (Özkan, 2010). The emergence of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a political force in Turkey has rekindled the debate over Turkey's historical roots and legacy as a successor state to the Ottoman Empire. The new AKP foreign policy is sometimes termed by various analysts as being "Neo-Ottoman" (Fisher Onar, 2009, Taşpınar, 2008). In particular, the work of Professor Ahmet Davutoglu, the present Foreign Secretary, has been pointed to as the most elaborate articulation of neo-Ottomanism and importance of the Ottoman legacy on the strategic thinking of Turkish decision makers. Davutoglu's writings and influential book Strategic Depth argue that a nation's value in world politics is predicated on its geo-strategic location and historical depth (Walker, 2009).

Heinz Kramer (2010), a former senior fellow of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs at SWP in Berlin, explains Neo-Ottoman thinking in two ways. First, ottomanism in its original historical emanation as a liberal political movement in the second half of the 19th century puts greater emphasis on the multi-cultural and multi-ethnical character of the Ottoman empire and on constitutionalism as the main elements that should be used to secure the survival and the "re-birth" of the empire rather than emphasizing Islam as the main element of imperial commonness" (Berkes, 1998; Mardin, 1963). Second, neo-ottomanism, as an intellectual idea that has been proposed to characterize the foreign policy of Turgut Ozal, is not so much concerned with Islam but with repositioning Turkey in the international order after end of the cold war by re-discovering Turkey's historical bonds to that former multi-national and multi-ethnical "community" of the Ottoman empire in its contemporary form. According to Kramer (2010), the term "neo-Ottomans" neither indicates a certain political or ideological preference nor an exclusive geographic focus of Turkey's foreign policy, not to speak of well-defined analytical concept.

In a March 2011 article for the Brookings Institute, "The Three Strategic Visions of Turkey," Turkish scholar Ömer Taspinar describes the term "neo-Ottomanism" with three different factors. According to Taşpınar (2011), AKP's neo-Ottomanism entails the following:

- The first is the willingness to come to terms with Turkey's Otoman heritage at home and abroad. Neo-Ottomanism does not seek to re-create the Ottoman Empire with territorial ambitions in the Middle East and beyond. Similarly, it does not seek to institute an Islamic legal system in modern Turkey. Instead, it favours a more moderate version of secularism at home and a more activist policy in foreign affairs, particularly in terms of a willingness to mediate conflicts. Neo-Ottomanism is at peace with the multinational legacy of Ottoman Empire, it opens the door for a less "ethnic" and more multicultural conceptualization of Turkish "citizenship."
- The second characteristic of neo-Ottomanism is a sense of grandeur and self-confidence in foreign policy. Neo-Ottomanism sees Turkey as a regional superpower. Its strategic vision and culture reflects the geographic reach of the Ottoman and Byzantine Empires. According to this Neo-Ottoman vision Turkey is a pivotal state which should play a very active diplomatic, political, and economic role in a wide region of which it is the "center".
- The third aspect of neo-Ottomanism is its goal of embracing the West as much as the Islamic world. Like the imperial city of Istanbul, which straddles Europe and Asia, neo-Ottomanism is Janus-faced.

Turkey is trying to make the best of the negotiator role by considering the delicate points of the countries with which it has relations. The statements of the minister of the foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, in the AK Party Kızılcahamam Camp were in the same direction. By saying "We have an Ottoman legacy. They call it as the New Ottoman. Yes, we are the New Ottoman. We have to care about the countries in our region. We are even expanding to North Africa. Powerful states are watching with confusion. Especially, France is trying to understand why we are expanding to North Africa. And, I gave directions. In whichever African country Sarkozy visits, he shall see the Turkish embassy building and the Turkish flag whenever he raises his head. I ordered them to build the embassy buildings in the best places." in a way he gave an answer to the lately claimed Ottoman mission of Turkey (Özen, 2009).

According to Yılmaz (2012), the term 'Neo-Ottomanism' is misleading for two reasons. First, the term Neo-Ottomanism has a negative dimension. Some Turkish commentators overlook this dimension, unlike Eliot A. Cohen (2004): "[t]o be an empire … is to be envied, resented, suspected, mistrusted, and, often enough, hated" by others. People in the countries ruled by the Ottomans will easily remember this. Undoubtedly, this would have a negative impact on the relations between countries of the region and Turkey, rather than improve them.

Secondly, it would be difficult to re-establish anything resembling the multi-cultural and multi-religious Ottoman Empire stretching from the Adriatic Sea to Yemen, because Turkey's demography, legal system and legitimisation are very different. The Ottoman Empire's legal system was based on the Sharia and represented by a powerful religious class of priests (*ulema*), who became civil servants of the State in the Republic. From 1774 onwards, the Ottoman sultans exercised the function of head of the Empire and leader of the Muslim community (caliphate). The Turkish Republic abolished both Caliphate and Sultanate in the 1920s. Neo-Ottomanism would thus require the establishment of a religiously-legitimised government (Yılmaz, 2012)

The "neo-ottoman" tag's lasting power has also been fed by pundits both inside and outside Turkey. "Neo-Ottoman thinking is a thorny issue" wrote Yigal Schleifer (2010), a freelance journalist based in Istanbul, in his article titled "Turkey's Neo-Ottoman problem". He suggested that "Turkish foreign policy may have a clear forward vision these days, but it also inescapably linked with its Ottoman past. Like it or not, the term "Neo-Ottomanism" will be around for a while."

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2. Neo-ottoman discourse: Empirical illustration

Social and political area acquires its meaning through discourse, especially through the articulation of meaning and identities. The process of establishing meaning is a political process, entangled by pluralism and struggles for power (Mouffe, 1993/2005). Post-marxsist discourse theory uses political power to fix the meaning of a subject and refers this process as articulation. Processes of articulation are political processes. In this context, discourse theory (DT) defines a series of linguistic concepts which turn out to be crucial for the analysis of hegemony: myth, social imaginary, nodal points and empty signifiers. Nodal points are defined as 'privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112). This working nodal point "policy maker's identity/ new actor". Turkey wants to create an important role in new global system. Other powers as well suggest such a new position for Turkey in terms of foreign policy.

This paper will show how mediatised Neo-Ottoman discourse area is articulated in foreign policy. The analysis is organized around what I have identified as four key rhetorical strategies structuring the articulation of Neo-Ottoman discourse in Turkish political and cultural context:

1- Policy maker identity/ Turkey; new actor
2- Extended large area in the past/ Ottoman; glorious legacy
3- Modern religious identity
4- Innovative government; AKP

These strategies are interrelated and can be theoretically understood as key signifying links in the chain of equivalence that produces and reproduces a distinctly Neo-Ottoman discourse. This analysis does not seek always to specify, but the heuristic distinction informs the analysis throughout. What follows is a general overview of how these strategies cohere ideologically within media and political discourse. In addition, the analysis is grounded in specific textual illustrations. In this study, articulation and nodal point can be schematized as follows:

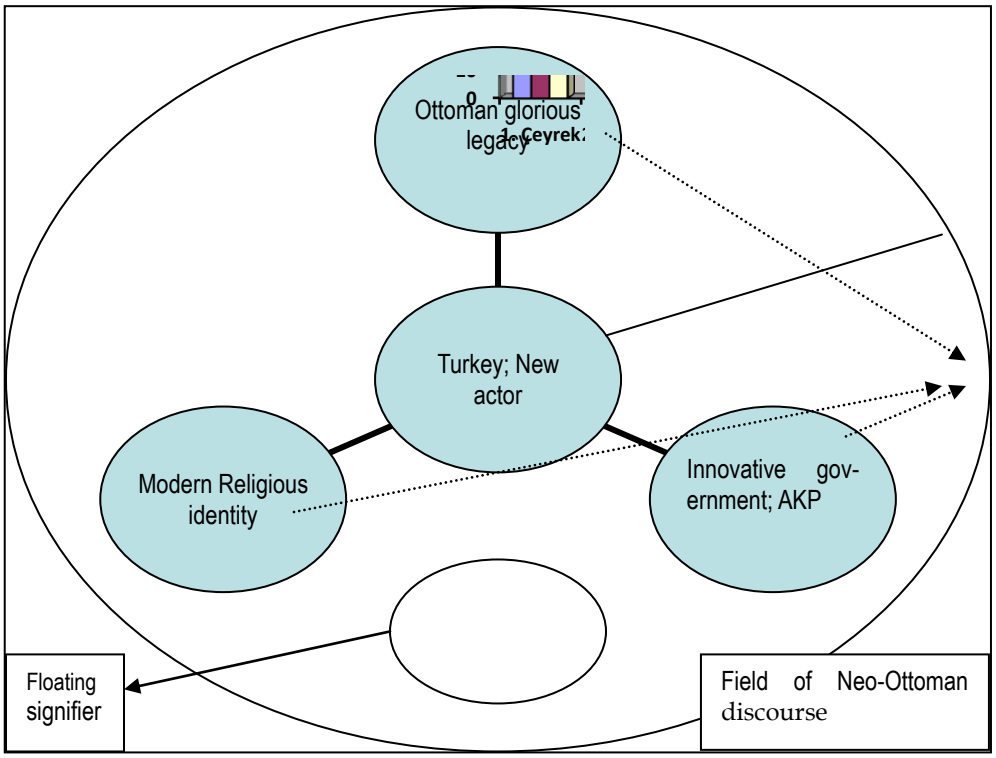

Figure 1: The main component of Neo-Ottoman's discourse

2.1. Policy maker identity/Turkey is the new actor

Neo-Ottoman's discourse is related to Turkey's new role. We can see the link between neo-ottoman discourse and the new active role of Turkey in press articles about Turkey's foreign policy. All this discourse emphasizes Turkey's new role in its region. Discursive meaning is a collection of Turkey's policy makers' identity. For example, Ferguson (2011) suggests reviving the Ottoman Empire to resolve problems in the Middle East. In fact, he points to Turkey's Ottoman heritage.

"The question no one wants to answer is what will come after the United States departs. The "happily ever after" scenario is that one country after another will embrace Western democracy. The nightmare scenario is either civil war or Islamist revolution. But a third possible outcome is a revived Ottoman Empire" (Ferguson, Newsweek, 2011)

Kendall (2011), writing about Turkey's new model in the Middle East, emphasizes its modern Islamic identity, and thus states that:.

"That policy was swiftly reversed when parts of the Arab world descended into turmoil this year. But Turkey has not taken a back seat. Now it presents itself to the new governments of the Arab Spring as a model, a useful example to show that Islam and modernity can go together. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was greeted by cheering crowds on a triumphant tour of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt recently" (Kendall, BBCNews Europe, 2011). Kendal presents Turkey as a new actor in this region.

Potter's (2011) article titled "Is Turkey building a new Ottoman Empire?" talks about Turkey on the way to become a new boss of the Ottoman Empire heritage.

"It's a broken world out there and today, more than ever, Turkey is offering itself as the glue to make everything right again. Need a new boss in the buckling Middle East? Been-there, done-that, for 500 years. See Ottoman Empire." (Potter, Thestar, 2011)

The Ottoman Empire discourse doesn't always produce positive effect on Turkey's new position. Mango (2010), the writer of two books on Ataturk: "The biography of the founder of Modern Turkey" and "From Sultan to Ataturk", bears some worries about the effect the Ottoman discourse causes on modern Turkey.

"It's crucial to keep Turkey's history in mind today, as the alliance between Turkey and the U.S. appears to grow shakier, primarily over the Middle Eastern policy of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. His finger-wagging rhetoric against Israel since its air strikes on Gaza in 2009, culminating in his endorsement of the Turkish Islamic activists who tried to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza, did not help U.S. efforts to restart the Middle Eastern peace process. Mr. Erdogan's ill-timed revival of an old proposal to swap enriched uranium with Iran, followed by his decision to vote in the Security Council against the imposition of further sanctions, served only to increase the threat of conflict."(Mango, The Wall Street Journal, 2010).

2.2. The Ottoman glorious legacy

The Neo-Ottoman discourse includes the Ottoman's legacy. The neo-ottoman discourse immediately brings to mind the administrative area of the Ottoman Empire. This reference bears an empirical power. Almost all that is written in this field emphasizes this "glorious past" and such huge administrative area.

"An Anatolian dynasty established on the ruins of the Byzantine Empire, the Ottomans were the standard-bearers of Islam after their conquest of Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1453. Their empire extended deep into Central Europe, including Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary. Having established Ottoman rule from Baghdad to Basra, from the Caucasus to the mouth of the Red Sea, and right along the Barbary Coast, Suleiman the Magnificent could claim: "I am the Sultan of Sultans, the Sovereign of Sovereigns … the shadow of God upon Earth." The 17th century saw further Ottoman expansion into Crete and even western Ukraine." (Ferguson, Newsweek, 2011)

"The dome next to Istanbul's ancient walls is one of the city's newest tourist attractions. The 360 degree panorama, complete with sound effects of cannon fire and fighting, depicts the moment in 1453 when the Byzantine city of Constantinople was seized by the Turkish Sultan, (Kendall, BBC, 2011)

"At its height in the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire stretched from the gates of Vienna to the Indian Ocean. It was the greatest military power in the world (Mango, The Wall Street Journal, 2010).

2.3. Modern Religious identity

Turkey was always promoted as a model of a "moderate Islamic state" throughout the troubled Greater Middle East on different platforms. The Ottoman Empire was an Islamic State, and now it is not surprising to see some religious identity in a neo-Ottoman discourse. For example, this identity was highlighted as below:

"In their awakening this year, many Arabs have looked to Turkey for inspiration. Turkey is not just a fellow Muslim country and their former imperial power but it also offers, for all its faults, a shining (and rare) example in the Islamic world of a strong democracy and a successful free-market economy"(Economist, 2011).

"The AKP's foreign policy is asymmetrically focused on Arab Islamists in particular and the Muslim Middle East more generally. It is pro-Hamas, pro-Syria, pro-Hezbollah, pro-Qatar, pro-Saudi. The AKP views the world as composed of religious blocks, and this disposition colors its views of the Middle East and the world" (Çagatay, 2009).

"This explains Erdogan's sustained campaign to alter the Turkish Constitution in ways that would likely increase his own power at the expense of the judiciary and the press as well as the military, all bastions of secularism. It explains his increasingly strident criticism of Israel's "state terrorism" in Gaza, where pro-Palestinian activists sent a headline-grabbing flotilla last year" (Ferguson, Newsweek, 2011).

In some quarters, Turkey's latest diplomatic, political and economic excursions have been dubbed 'Neo-Ottoman'. Those holding this view believe that Erdogan's government is seeking to export Islamic imperialism and create a regional Muslim bloc that would pose a threat to the West.

Michael Sailhan (2012), Middle East Online, comments this: "Neo-Ottoman Islamist fantasies worry European diplomats. European Union diplomats accuse Ankara of using probes into alleged plots against government as tool to silence opponents, compromise secular credentials"

Need someone to deliver tough love to Syria, Iran and Israel, all at the same time? We can do that, too. We've got the second-largest army in NATO, after the U.S. We play nice. We can even talk to Pakistan. And when we talk, they listen. Need a bridge between east and west that brings both halves together in harmony? Apply here. Good terms available (Potter, 2010, Thestar).

Such are the superficial slogans of the neo-Ottomans, whose sultan — three-term Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan — is flexing political muscle unmatched since the days of Kemal Ataturk, who founded modern Turkey from the ashes of empire nearly a century ago.

Erdogan's Turkey has reasons to preen. It can look to withering neighbour and long time rival Greece with something approximating pity, whisper-

ing, "But for the grace of Allah."

2.4. Innovative government: AKP

The neo-Ottoman philosophy coincides with the moderately Islamic AKP's rise to power in 2002. The elaboration of the neo-Ottoman geo-strategy is usually associated with the Prime-Minister Erdogan's chief foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoglu. In his writings, particularly in the influential book Strategic Depth, Davutoglu proposes the principles of Turkey's neo-Ottoman foreign policy based on the concept of geographic and historical depth

Neo-ottoman thinking starts with AKP's recent policies.

The founder of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Erdogan is a seductive figure. To many, he is the personification of a moderate Islamism. He has presided over a period of unprecedented economic growth. He has sought to reduce the power of the military. It was no accident that one of President Obama's first overseas trips was to Istanbul. His ambition, it seems clear, is to return to the pre-Atatürk era, when Turkey was not only militantly Muslim but also a regional superpower" (Ferguson, Newsweek magazine, 2011).

"Under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey that had always been a status quo power is acting as an opportunist player. It sees a vacuum, created by the United States' strategic retreat under President Barack Obama, and hopes to fill it with a mixture of diplomacy, trade and military power. Needless to say, Turkey does not want Iran, an adventurist power, to fill this vacuum. With the inevitable fall of the Assad regime in Damascus, Tehran would lose a key client state. Change in Syria would also spell the end of the Lebanese branch of Hezbollah" (Taheri, Al Arabıya News, 2011).

3. Conclusion

The Ottoman Empire is remembered as a great empire comparable to the Roman and British ones that both ruled parts of the Middle East. The positive and negative experiences of Ottoman times should help Turkey overcome its internal and external problems and build genuine cooperation, progress and prosperity by working side by side with its neighbours and allies for an enduring peace in the region. But in fact, the Ottoman Empire is dead and buried forever. Neo-Ottomanism, as an intellectual movement, an attempt at reformulating Turkish identity, and a foreign policy strategy, is not exactly a brand-new phenomenon. It embodies the multi-ethnic composition of Ottoman society and the relative tolerance of Ottoman Islam as sources of pluralism and openness for domestic social and political life (Onar, 2009).

From neo-ottoman discourse, it is also questionable whether Turkey can act as a role model. Turkey still has huge economic and democratic deficits. When looking at the Turkish experience of the democratisation process which started in the 19th century, it is clear that it requires patience and perseverance. The greatest difficulty consists in getting society to a point where it internalises freedoms and human rights. A further requirement is the establishment and smooth running of political institutions. At present, Turkey is regarded as an important middle-sized regional power in economic and political realms and Erdoğan's popularity on Arab streets has increased strongly. Turkey's decision and policy makers are, therefore, well-advised not to be involved in the events directly. Instead, Turkey should carefully and conscientiously draw lessons from its past experiences with the MENA region. It is a historical fact that the friends, enemies and coalitions in this region can quickly change overnight. Nobody knows how the emotional and unpredictable crowds would behave, and on which side they will be tomorrow (Yılmaz, 2012).

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