



# Responding to Turkey's Purchase of Russia's S-400 Missile System

By Max Hoffman

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The United States and Turkey have been at odds for at least six years, driven by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's descent into autocracy; his assertive brand of Turkish nationalism and anti-American rhetoric; and repeated clashes between the two nations over how to handle the Syrian civil war.<sup>1</sup> This prolonged crisis in relations between the two NATO allies is now entering a new, decisive phase.

The litany of disagreements, as well as the domestic trends underpinning them, are discussed in a 2018 Center for American Progress report.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, the United States has sought to dissuade Turkey from its planned purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system, dispatching several delegations to convince Ankara to purchase the American-made Patriot system instead.<sup>3</sup> These efforts appear to have failed; earlier this month, Erdoğan announced that Turkey will not turn back from its deal to buy the S-400.<sup>4</sup> This decision should prompt a fundamental re-evaluation of U.S.-Turkish security ties.

Surveying the U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship, there is little reason for optimism. The often uneasy cooperation between the United States and Turkey on Middle East policy has broken down entirely due to differing stances on the Syrian war and the regional Kurdish issue. Moreover, any pretense that Turkey is a democracy has long since evaporated. Defenders of the U.S.-Turkey relationship have argued that Turkey is a problematic but essential partner in confronting a newly assertive Russia. The S-400 deal—coming after more than three years of deepening Turkish-Russian cooperation on energy issues and in Syria—cuts right to the heart of this last remaining pillar.<sup>5</sup>

U.S. and NATO officials have said that the S-400 would pose a risk to NATO assets, as the system's radars are able to build detailed signatures of NATO planes—including the F-35, the alliance's premier fifth-generation combat aircraft.<sup>6</sup> Western officials fear that data from the S-400 system would find its way into Russian hands, making it easier for Russia to target NATO planes.<sup>7</sup> Beyond this operational issue is the political message that Turkey's decision sends about the country's overall trajectory and reliability. Weapon systems are geopolitical anchors; buying billions of dollars of Russian equipment creates a path of dependency for Turkey, bringing associated maintenance and sustainment agreements as well as attendant advisers.

Erdoğan is increasingly unrestrained in pursuing what he sees to be Turkey's—and, often, his own—interests, with little regard for the wishes of traditional security partners. Turkey seems to want to enjoy all the benefits of membership in the Western security bloc—including top-of-the-line military technology, prestige, and protection from outside aggression—without living up to the responsibilities of that membership, such as presenting a united front against Russia. Turkey should be pressed to make a political decision on this issue; delaying the moment of reckoning will only increase the costs for the United States and other NATO allies. The questions now confronting the U.S. and NATO are as follows: How much further will Turkey deteriorate and distance itself from the alliance's norms? And should the Western bloc start planning for the worst-case scenario?

This worst-case scenario could include a further deepening of Turkish relations with Russia; the continued democratic deterioration and erosion of state institutions within the country; and a decisive nationalist turn against the United States and the West. In such a scenario, Turkey would be an illiberal state that could not be trusted to decisively side with the United States in a crisis; there would be little reason for deep security investments in the country.

This issue brief discusses the steps that the United States should take in response to this decisive moment in bilateral relations: 1) signal in advance what the United States will do if Turkey takes delivery of the S-400 system; and 2) begin a longer-term process of downgrading security ties with Turkey to address the vulnerabilities posed by Turkey's cozy relations with Russia, starting with restricting Ankara's access to sensitive U.S. military technology—particularly the F-35.

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## How to calibrate a principled response

In calibrating a response, the United States should focus on one overarching goal: preserving a cohesive democratic security architecture capable of defending itself. NATO was created to defend a democratic political order, primarily against potential Soviet aggression. Turkey's democratic record is full of demerits, and there are now serious doubts about the country's strategic reliability in defending the democratic bloc. As the contest against resurgent autocracies has shifted from the showdown of strategic military capabilities that defined the Cold War to the messy, hybrid struggle of the present, a genuine commitment to democracy has taken on more importance than it did in the face of a looming Soviet military threat.

Before settling upon a response, it is also important for the United States to understand how Turkey sees its S-400 decision. Erdoğan has long sought to chart a more independent course that shows less deference to the West. He sees the world as multipolar and feels Turkey should be a power in its own right. Moreover, he has dismissed the West's democratic rhetoric as hypocritical and does not share these values.<sup>8</sup> As a result,

Erdoğan has adopted a transactional approach toward relations with the United States and Europe and has balanced those traditional alliances with deepened ties with Iran, China, and Russia.<sup>9</sup> To be clear, this approach is not limited to Erdoğan and has a measure of support within both Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and military, though it is far from a consensus view.<sup>10</sup> Turkey is not, therefore, choosing Russia; nor is the West losing Turkey. Turkey is choosing its own, more independent path. As part of this approach, the Turkish government has sought to build its domestic military-industrial base, seeking domestic production and technology transfer in its purchase agreements.<sup>11</sup>

While Turkey, as a sovereign state, may purchase arms from whomever it likes, that decision should not be free of consequences and, accordingly, should affect Turkey's future as a member of the Western security club designed to guard the democratic order against Russian aggression. Indeed, it is important for there to be clear and serious consequences for decisions that directly undermine the central purpose of the NATO alliance. This principle does not apply only to Turkey. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, France pulled back from a deal to sell two Mistral-class amphibious assault ships to Russia, despite the economic costs of renegeing on the deal.<sup>12</sup> Moscow seeks to destroy NATO and weaken the democratic order; Turkey does not get to play both sides when it comes to security ties with Russia.

Working from this premise, the United States should intentionally downgrade security relations with Turkey if it follows through on the S-400 deal. Despite the current tensions between the two governments, this should not be a personal or emotional move. The United States should not seek to make Turkey a pariah state, but rather communicate that Turkey is no longer a trusted security partner and starkly illustrate the costs to Turkey of fostering close strategic relations with Russia.

The downgrading of security ties should begin in the areas of the U.S.-Turkish relationship that are already most concerning for the United States. Given Turkey's troubling trajectory and the looming S-400 delivery, the most dubious aspects of U.S.-Turkish security ties would be:

- **Turkish access to high-tech U.S. military support and equipment, particularly the F-35.** This access would need to be immediately curtailed to preserve the United States' and NATO's military-technological edge.
- **The size of the collective U.S. and NATO military footprint in Turkey, as well as the importance of Turkish bases to U.S. contingency operations and planning in the region.** This would be a substantial vulnerability should Turkey show it is not reliable with regard to Russia. The United States should move immediately to reduce reliance on Turkey in this area.
- **Turkey's participation in NATO activities designed to counter Russian influence and prepare for potential Russian aggression.** If Ankara takes delivery of the Russian system, NATO should stop further security investments in Turkey and begin the process of extricating Turkey from sensitive counter-Russian activities.

## Signal consequences in advance

Every aspect of the U.S. response should be clearly signaled in advance. This messaging is already well underway. In June 2018, Wess Mitchell, then-assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, told Congress that the “acquisition of S-400 will inevitably affect the prospects for Turkish military-industrial cooperation with the United States, including [the] F-35.”<sup>13</sup> Later, in August 2018, Congress passed a National Defense Authorization Act that prevented the U.S. Department of Defense from delivering F-35s to Turkey until it had reported on the implications of Turkey’s planned S-400 purchase for U.S.-Turkish relations and NATO operations.<sup>14</sup> The ensuing Pentagon report said that the United States “will reassess Turkey’s continued participation” in the F-35 program if the S-400 purchase moves forward, highlighting the deal’s myriad negative repercussions for bilateral relations, NATO interoperability, and Turkey’s vulnerability to Russia.<sup>15</sup>

The United States should be unequivocal in its response at every level of government, including the president: Turkey can purchase either the Russian S-400s or the U.S.-made F-35s, but it cannot have both. This response would be strengthened by additional warnings from other NATO allies, particularly fellow members of the consortium buying the F-35, such as the United Kingdom—which Ankara sees as a more sympathetic Western country. NATO officials entrusted with guarding against Russian aggression could also help bolster the case by expressing similar concerns. Already, NATO’s supreme allied commander, U.S. Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, has said that Turkey should not receive the F-35 if it buys the S-400.<sup>16</sup> Scaparrotti’s statement carries great weight, but more non-American military and political leaders should publicly voice their concerns about the purchase.

In order to further signal the consequences of such a decision, the United States should make clear its minimally acceptable outcome regarding the S-400 sale: that Turkey not take delivery of the system. Turkish officials have reportedly offered compromise solutions to alleviate American concerns about the F-35’s security while moving forward with the sale.<sup>17</sup> These tactical workarounds should not be sufficient for the U.S. government; the sale itself demonstrates a fundamental difference in how the two countries assess Russian intentions and the role of the NATO alliance. This equivocation vis-a-vis Russia should disqualify countries from the level of close security cooperation Turkey has enjoyed thus far.

The United States should also make clear that it would be happy for Turkey to purchase an alternative air defense system from the Eurosam consortium, which has put forward competing offers to sell Turkey comparable equipment designed by trusted NATO allies or to not purchase a new system at all and rely on the deployment of NATO defenses and its own air force in the event of a threat.<sup>18</sup> After all, Ankara is only contracted to buy one S-400 system with an option to buy a second; that is not enough to constitute a meaningful air defense system.<sup>19</sup> By messaging that it is open to alternative solutions, the United States could demonstrate that it is not simply concerned with securing U.S. commercial interests or haggling over price, but rather genuinely concerned about exposure to Russia.

Moreover, while the United States should not totally discount the use of incentives to dissuade Turkey, it also should not try to negotiate the Turkish government down from the aggressive position it has staked out—for example, by offering overly generous terms on the sale of Patriots. This is a dynamic Erdoğan has repeatedly used against the United States and Europe, staking out a maximalist position and then settling for something less. The U.S. line should be clear: If Turkey cancels the S-400 purchase, all sorts of incentives are up for discussion; but those conversations cannot take place while this purchase hangs over the alliance.

Finally, this diplomacy should, to the extent possible, be conducted privately, as Erdoğan is less likely to backtrack from his maximalist position if he is publicly cornered. He will be weighing his options with one eye firmly on the domestic balance of power within Turkey. Erdoğan has stoked virulent anti-Western sentiment on the nationalist right and now must manage that public pressure, which might intensify if he visibly climbs down from his position on the S-400 purchase. Yet Erdoğan also faces a less visible challenge of balancing competing cadres within the state and the military—some of whom favor maintaining closer security ties with the United States, and some of whom want to distance Turkey from the West.<sup>20</sup>

#### [Begin to downgrade security ties](#)

When designing punitive measures, it is generally useful to have phased or escalating consequences—sequencing the response so that the costs increase over time, allowing the other side time to change course. Yet if the delivery of the S-400 system is the trigger, it makes more sense to clearly signal the consequences in advance and then immediately implement them when the red line is crossed. If Turkey, then, chooses to complete the purchase and take delivery, it will clearly demonstrate that it received the U.S. and NATO signals, weighed them, and disregarded them. This would represent a major setback for the United States and NATO—both of which want close security ties with Turkey—but a strong, immediate response will be essential. Having lost Turkey as a reliable partner, this strong response would at least guard sensitive military technology and establish a measure of deterrent credibility in the eyes of other security partners and participants in the F-35 program.

As stated above, the punitive measures should focus on the aspects of the security relationship about which the United States is already uneasy. The F-35 program should be at the top of this list. Turkey is an original member of the F-35 consortium, having joined in 2002, and has invested \$1.25 billion in the development.<sup>21</sup> Turkish companies are entwined in the aircraft's supply chain: AYESAŞ is the sole supplier for the plane's cockpit heads-up display; Turkish Aerospace Industries makes parts of the fuselage; and Alp Aviation manufactures hundreds of parts for the airframe and engine.<sup>22</sup>

Extricating Turkey from the program would undoubtedly be messy, but it may be necessary. The consortium approach and distributed supply chain were designed to defray the costs for each project partner and bind them together around a massive shared defense investment. The list of countries involved—the United Kingdom, Italy,

the Netherlands, Turkey, Canada, Australia, Norway, Denmark, Israel, and Singapore—reflected this favored security status. However, the consortium reflects a fundamentally different geopolitical reality than that which the United States confronts today. Turkey is now an authoritarian state run by a president who does not see his country as integrated into the Western-led order. Moreover, data security and the theft of defense technology by authoritarian rivals are far greater concerns today than they were in 2002. Notwithstanding Turkey’s \$1.25 billion investment, the United States is projected to spend \$406 billion developing the jet, a number that does not include the tens of billions of dollars spent in the research and development phase.<sup>23</sup> This investment cannot be held hostage by an ally of dubious reliability.

Excluding Turkey from the program would be disruptive; therefore, if the United States is forced to take this path, Turkey should be repaid any money owed for breach of contract. In July 2018, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis spoke before Congress of the disruption, saying: “If the Turkish supply chain was disrupted today, it would result in an aircraft production break, delaying delivery of 50-75 jets and would take approximately 18-24 months to re-source parts.”<sup>24</sup> Still, even without Turkey, project partners would be able to fill manufacturing gaps, and the program would surely survive. Heidi Grant, former Air Force deputy undersecretary of international affairs, said Turkey’s exclusion would not have “any type of devastating impact.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it would be more disruptive to disentangle Turkey from the F-35 program further down the line, as the program continues to mature and production rates increase in 2019 and 2020. Therefore, the question is whether the U.S. government expects Turkey’s trajectory to improve—in its domestic politics, in its stances toward the West and Russia, or in its ability to secure the defense data and technology associated with the program. CAP’s research finds little reason for optimism on the first two fronts.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the F-35 program, the United States should immediately recalibrate its broader defense posture within Turkey. The United States has long stationed nuclear weapons and aircraft at Incirlik Air Base outside the city of Adana. The deployment has always been a source of bilateral tension, with Ankara often using the arrangement as a way to demonstrate its importance and pressure the United States on regional issues. For more than a year in 2014 and 2015, for example, the United States was forced to execute its counter-Islamic State (IS) air campaign from bases and aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf while it negotiated with Ankara to allow strikes to be conducted from Incirlik—adding to the difficulty and expense of the campaign.<sup>27</sup>

It is time to change this arrangement, which both provides Turkey with leverage over the United States and serves as a domestic irritant in bilateral relations, inflaming Turkish nationalist sentiment against the United States. For all the reasons outlined above, U.S. nuclear weapons should be removed if, inexplicably, they are still at Incirlik. It is simply not safe to house such destructive weapons in a country with such uncertain political prospects. Pulling American forces from Incirlik would also send a clear political signal that the United States is planning for life after Turkey.

Initially, the United States could leave untouched the other parts of its posture in Turkey, including NATO facilities in Konya, Izmir, and several other locations. Alongside this downsizing process—rendered more palatable as the U.S. campaign against IS winds down—the United States should pursue other basing arrangements in the region. Indeed, the United States already appears to be expanding its basing options in Jordan and should continue to hedge its bets, pursuing potential options in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in Greece, and in Cyprus.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, each of these options is problematic, but the realignment is necessary and may help to clarify the stakes for Turkish decision-makers.<sup>29</sup> In any event, given the history of U.S. base access, and the trajectory of Turkish politics, it is unlikely that Ankara would grant American access in a crisis scenario.

For the time being, the United States and other core F-35 participants, such as the United Kingdom, should take a primary role in responding to Turkey's drift, with the goal of insulating NATO from the wider deterioration in ties between alliance members—though that firewall is unlikely to hold in the long term. A phased response may prove useful here; the F-35 partners can make a strong stand, leaving NATO largely uninvolved for the time being. If Turkey changes course and reaffirms its commitment to the West, NATO can provide the institutional framework within which relations can eventually be rebuilt. If Turkey cultivates deeper ties with Russia, the West can escalate measures within NATO. Indeed, given Turkey's equivocal stance toward Moscow, at that stage, it would be prudent to explore steps within NATO's governance structure to extricate Turkey from certain activities aimed at countering Russia, such as the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and certain intelligence sharing arrangements.

If Turkey purchases the S-400, it could also face sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>30</sup> The law allows for sanctions on any individual who engages in significant transactions with the Russian defense or intelligence sectors. Among many damaging provisions, the CAATSA sanctions include the potential denial of licenses to import U.S. goods or technology under the Arms Export Control Act—which governs almost all U.S. defense sales to and military interactions with foreign governments.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the law allows the United States to completely cut off governments from American defense technology and equipment if those governments buy significant military material from Russia.

The U.S. president is permitted to waive these sanctions if it is deemed to be in the vital national security interests of the United States. Given President Donald Trump's affinity for both Erdoğan and Putin, it is unclear whether he would issue such a waiver. Regardless, the U.S. Congress can force the issue through its control of the Department of Defense budget—for example, by prohibiting the department from using appropriated funds to transfer the F-35 planes to Turkish hands or to train Turkish pilots on the planes. Moreover, legislation could explicitly ban certain arms sales to Turkey. Congress should make clear that it will push the administration to fully enforce the law and impose sanctions on Turkish companies and officials involved in dealings with the Russian defense sector.

If Turkey takes further steps toward strategic cooperation with Russia, and full implementation of the CAATSA sanctions follows, it could mark the final stage of downgrading of the security relationship. Full implementation of CAATSA sanctions could bring an end to the issuance of Arms Export Control Act licenses, which would endanger the full range of defense cooperation between the United States and Turkey. However, this would constitute a nuclear option—cutting off Turkey from crucial NATO systems—and should not be considered unless Turkey goes further toward strategic alignment with Russia.

Nonetheless, thinking through these ramifications would be a useful exercise for Turkish policymakers who value their country's military cooperation with the West and the contracts, equipment, spare parts, and maintenance it brings. Beyond the F-35 program, Turkey's military fields an arsenal of U.S.-made equipment and continues to buy Chinook and UH-60 helicopters and to upgrade F-16 jets previously manufactured under license from the United States.<sup>32</sup>

### Tools that the United States should not employ

The list of punitive measures not outlined in this brief is also instructive. The United States holds huge sway over Turkey's economic future. Separate from the S-400 response, the United States and the European Union could consider a coordinated strategy to place economic pressure on Ankara in an effort to improve its human rights record and to release political prisoners. For example, the Global Magnitsky Act provides the statutory authority to sanction individuals for gross human rights abuses and has been used in the past to sanction Turkish officials for the unjust imprisonment of U.S. citizens.<sup>33</sup> The United States could continue to consider the narrow use of the law in response to human rights abuses, including the continued detention of human rights activists, journalists, Kurdish political leaders, and U.S. citizens.

The United States should not, however, use this leverage in response to the Turkish S-400 purchase. Such steps would be overly punitive and would harm the Turkish people; they would be an overreaction borne of justified anger over Turkey's authoritarian drift. Furthermore, the Trump administration's abdication of even a rhetorical commitment to human rights has undermined the Magnitsky Act's moral credibility; its use under this president would only draw attention to the increasingly instrumental use of sanctions absent legal or moral consideration.

Likewise, President Trump has previously used Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 to implement tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from a number of countries—including Turkey—on national security grounds.<sup>34</sup> The announcement of tariffs on Turkish steel coincided with a sharp devaluation of the Turkish lira and serious economic pressure on Turkey. While this is a strong point of leverage, it should not be used in the S-400 case. The tariffs are legally dubious, unrelated to this issue, and unnecessarily punitive;<sup>35</sup> they would anger many other, more reliable allies who are needed to present a united front against the Russian threat and would undermine the credibility of the United States as it makes the case that the S-400 purchase is dangerous to NATO security.



For the time being, the United States should also avoid using several additional points of economic leverage. The U.S. Senate has discussed cutting Turkey off from international financial institutions in response to the government's human rights abuses;<sup>36</sup> some might seek to use this leverage to push Ankara to change its strategic line as well. Likewise, many have called for higher fines on Turkish banks—notably Halkbank—for Iran sanctions evasion.<sup>37</sup> These steps would certainly undermine Turkey's economic prospects, but that is not the goal. Such actions are unrelated to the issue at hand and only serve to further undermine U.S. credibility. The United States must evaluate such decisions based on the merits of each individual case and should not allow those decisions to be affected by separate political considerations. Recalling the overarching goal of maintaining a cohesive democratic bloc capable of defending itself, these aggressive moves would only lead reliable allies and partners to conclude that the United States is abusing its financial clout to game an international system it should instead be defending.

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## Conclusion

Ankara is increasingly charting its own course; despite relying on the United States and NATO for security, it is largely unrestrained by the wishes of its traditional security partners. In Turkey's desire to hedge its geopolitical bets, the country has cultivated deeper ties with Russia—ties that make many Western security officials nervous about the reliability of their putative ally. The S-400 purchase should be used as a clarifying moment regarding these doubts, and the import of this decision should privately be made clear to Turkish decision-makers—particularly President Erdoğan. Furthermore, American and NATO officials should actively consider how far Turkey's political deterioration could go, as well as how to reduce exposure to Ankara's whims, rather than digging in alongside an aggressive and unreliable autocratic government.

Certainly, the “West bears some blame” for the current situation; some scholars have argued that a more complete embrace of Ankara in 2015—when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet following repeated violations of its airspace—could have prevented the current course of events.<sup>38</sup> But this argument does not hold up to scrutiny. The purchase of a Russian air defense system to protect Turkish airspace does not make sense when Russia is the only country threatening that airspace. The S-400 purchase seems to be driven by Ankara's clear desire to hedge its geopolitical bets, rather than by narrow procurement criteria or a realistic assessment of the threats.

Washington's attempts to manage the crises in bilateral relations with tactical adjustments have failed to stop Turkey's domestic deterioration or more assertive line internationally. This accommodative approach was understandable given Turkey's importance to NATO's defense posture; to stabilization efforts in Iraq and Syria; to European integration and energy strategy; and to the refugee crisis. However, this approach is rooted in the belief that the current tumult is an aberration and that adjustments to address discrete bilateral issues could reset relations. That belief may be fundamentally flawed, as the S-400 decision is demonstrating.

Turkey is likely to continue to pursue a more assertive, independent foreign policy with less deference to its Western partners. The United States and its allies should face this unfortunate reality and prepare—identifying which core interests warrant a hardline approach, clearly communicating red lines to Turkey, and hedging security investments to prepare for the worst-case scenario. The S-400 decision should be one of those red lines. If Turkey is not a democracy and does not reliably defend the democratic bloc, it should not enjoy the benefits of membership in the democratic bloc. Indeed, the democratic security architecture should adapt so that it is not dependent on Ankara, and the United States should lead this effort. However, if Turkey opts to shift its strategic alignment, it should know what is at stake.

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## Endnotes

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- 7 See, for example, Sebastien Roblin, "America's Big Fear: Turkey Mixing F-35s and Russia's S-400 Air Defense System," *The National Interest*, July 7, 2018, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/americas-big-fear-turkey-mixing-f-35s-and-russias-s-400-air-defense-system-25152>.
- 8 See, for example, *Hürriyet Daily News*, "Venezuela's Maduro hails Erdoğan as 'leader of new multi-polar world,'" July 9, 2018, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/venezuelas-maduro-hails-erdogan-as-leader-of-new-multi-polar-world-134374>. This attitude was on display at the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) summit in Johannesburg, where Turkey expressed an interest in joining the body. See Philip Owira, "BRICS talks offer opportunities for Turkey – business group," *TRT World*, July 25, 2018, available at <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/brics-talks-offer-opportunities-for-turkey-business-group-19138>; Semih Idiz, "After Erdogan's win, what's next for Turkey's foreign policy?," *Al-Monitor*, July 3, 2018, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/turkey-what-will-happen-to-ties-with-west-in-new-system.html>.
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