

Strategic ethno-politics in the service of NATO?

New perspectives on how to confront the main adversaries of the Alliance

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Resumé

Krigen i Ukraina och Mellersta Östern har försvagat Rysslands respektive Irans ställning i Centralasien och Kaukasus vilket givit Nato möjlighet att flytta fram sina geopolitiska positioner. Eftersom Kina redan uppmärksammat detta gryende maktvakuum riskerar Alliansen att hamna på efterkälken. I artikeln argumenteras därför att Nato bör bejaka den etno-politiska potential Turkiet besitter för att vinna strategiska fördelar gentemot var och en av de tre huvudantagonisterna. Rekommendationerna kan synas problematiska. Det finns givetvis inga garantier för att enskilda Natomedlemmar, däribland Turkiet, utgår från Alliansens intressen i sitt nationella agerande. Å andra sidan finns heller inga garantier för att om Alliansen förblir passivt så kommer även medlemmarna vara inaktiva. Att involvera Turkiet i Alliansens strategi vis-à-vis främst Ryssland anses därför vara att föredra jämfört med ett enskilt agerande Turkiet såsom i t ex Syrien. Självklart skulle Natos ökade geopolitiska inflytande inte betraktas med blida ögon av huvudantagonisterna men Alliansens strategier syftar väl knappast till att blidka vare sig Moskva, Peking eller Teheran? Turkiets ledande roll inom Organization of Turkic States (OTS) bedöms utgöra en för ändamålet lämplig plattform. OTS samlar de turkiska folken i de "turkiska" staterna Azerbajdzjan, Kazakstan, Kirgizstan, Turkiet, Turkmenistan och Uzbekistan, samt inkluderar de turkiska diaspororna i bl a Iran, Kina och Ryssland. Genom att bejaka etno-politikens möjligheter rekommenderas Alliansen att vid kommande toppmöte besluta att formalisera och stärka Turkiets roll avseende Natos aktiviteter i Centralasien respektive Kaukasus, uppmuntra och bistå Turkiet att expandera det försvarsindustriella samarbetet inom OTS och att utveckla en plattform för direkt säkerhetssamarbete mellan Nato och OTS.

THE 2025 NATO summit in The Hague marked a pivotal recalibration in the Alliance's strategic posture, anchored primarily in commitments to increase defence spending and enhance collective capabilities. Clearly, as preparations begin for the 2026 Summit, to be hosted by Türkiye, NATO must broaden its aperture. Deterrence against Russia can no longer be confined to upholding the territorial integrity of existing members and

supporting Ukraine. The next summit must prioritise an outward-looking policy that leverages strategic depth, regional partnerships, and geopolitical realities, particularly in the post-Soviet space.

This article is written in recognition of a narrow but critical window for policy transformation. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has not only eroded its military resources but has also weakened its capacity

to exert influence across Central Asia and the Caucasus. Concurrently, the geopolitical footprint of Iran has been diminished by sustained military confrontations with Israel and the United States (US), the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the collapse of Iranian proxy coherence across the Middle East. These conditions have created a strategic vacuum in the greater Eurasian space — one that NATO cannot afford to leave unaddressed.

Notably, NATO is partly to blame for creating this vacuum. In 2014, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was completed and replaced with a far smaller non-combat mission, i.e. Resolute Support. In 2017, NATO's Liaison Office for Central Asia in Tashkent was closed, and in May 2021, NATO completed its military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Identifying Türkiye as a key member

Within this evolving power matrix, Türkiye emerges as a uniquely positioned NATO member, capable of projecting influence beyond the Alliance's formal borders. As a regional power with deep ethno-political ties in the Turkic world as well as growing economic and military leverage in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Türkiye offers NATO a ready-made conduit for strategic reach. Rather than viewing Ankara's regional assertiveness as a source of ambivalence, this article contends that NATO should recognise and actively harness Türkiye's influence on counterbalancing Russia's residual presence and China's economic interests, as well as blunt Iran's shrinking capacity to act as a spoiler.

This article explores how NATO could strengthen its posture towards these three adversaries by leveraging Türkiye's influ-

ence over the Turkic community, including Turkic diasporas, beyond Allied borders without compromising the legitimacy of the governments involved. Despite focusing on the potential to deter and contain Russia, the article argues that the recommended measures would also impact the Chinese and Iranian efforts to promote their influence respectively in the region. Clearly, these measures would benefit from coordination with the European Union (EU). My ambition, however, is only to present policy recommendations for NATO, an organisation that, unlike the EU, has Türkiye as one of its members.

Ethno-politics and NATO

Ethno-politics explores how ethnic identities, including those based on culture, language, race and/or religion, shape political behaviour. It includes the purposeful activities of a state or a group of states aimed at regulating relations between ethnic groups.¹ A common approach in ethno-politics is prioritising minorities.² States and international organisations may introduce multicultural policies, affirmative action, or federal arrangements to accommodate ethnic diversity.³ However, when ethno-politics is viewed through the lens of *Realpolitik*, the emphasis on minorities becomes more utilitarian than altruistic.

Realpolitik, characterised by pragmatic and interest-driven political strategies, often manipulates ethnic identities to strengthen state power, preserve territorial integrity, or boost geopolitical influence.⁴ In this context, support for minority rights may act as a tool for domestic control or international diplomacy rather than a genuine commitment to pluralism. For example, external powers may intervene, claiming to protect ethnic minorities while pursuing broader geopolitical objectives.⁵ Therefore, while

ethno-politics can serve as a framework for justice, under Realpolitik, it frequently becomes a calculated strategy to serve the interests of the state.

Only a limited number of scholarly works have explored how the strategic mobilisation of ethnic identities has been instrumentalised to advance NATO's security objectives in the post-Cold War period. The existing literature largely overlooks the integration of ethno-politics into NATO's strategic approach to achieving deterrence objectives, focusing instead on its application during the execution of military operations and post-conflict interventions. Much of this scholarship concentrates on NATO's involvement in the Western Balkans.⁶ Others have extended this argument by demonstrating how NATO's evolving strategic doctrine has increasingly incorporated identity-based protections, aligning military intervention with Euro-Atlantic normative commitments.⁷ Collectively, these studies suggest that NATO has not only responded to ethno-political conflict but has actively shaped ethnic dynamics to align with its strategic aims. However, a significant gap remains in the literature on how individual NATO members may leverage ethno-political dynamics outside NATO territory in a deliberate and coordinated manner to further Allied strategic objectives.

NATO deterrence and containment vis-à-vis Russia

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reasserted Russia as NATO's foremost strategic threat.⁸ Consequently, the Alliance maintains a posture that credibly deters Russian military aggression against NATO-territory while containing Russian influence in peripheral regions, without risking direct confrontation.⁹ Central to NATO's adaptation is the

Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA).¹⁰ While DDA primarily focuses on military aspects, the broader context of NATO's response explicitly mentions tools akin to soft power.¹¹

Significantly, the DDA's implications extend beyond NATO territory. While Article 5 obligations are limited to members, NATO provides substantial support to non-members. These efforts form part of a broader containment strategy but stop short of offering full security guarantees.¹² Strategically, this approach serves two purposes. First, it reinforces NATO's deterrence posture by complicating Russian calculations vis-à-vis non-members. Second, it sends a symbolic message: regional coercion and hybrid aggression will be met with sustained resistance. By strengthening partners' resilience, NATO aims to reduce their vulnerability and limit Moscow's capacity to exploit regional instability for strategic gain.¹³

The key role of Türkiye

The six Turkic members of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), i.e., Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan (observer), Türkiye and Uzbekistan, represent about 170 million citizens and an example of ethno-politically based international organization. OTS also represents some 190 million Turkic-speaking people, of whom only about 120 million live in OTS countries. Consequently, 70 million Turkics are subjects of non-Turkic countries, primarily in Iran (~23 million), China (~15 million), Russia (~13 million) and EU/NATO-Europe (~6 million). Clearly, this gives OTS a legitimate objective "having an effective role in influencing public opinion in the countries where our peoples live".¹⁴ Moreover, it motivates enhanced security cooperation among OTS-members due to "recent global and

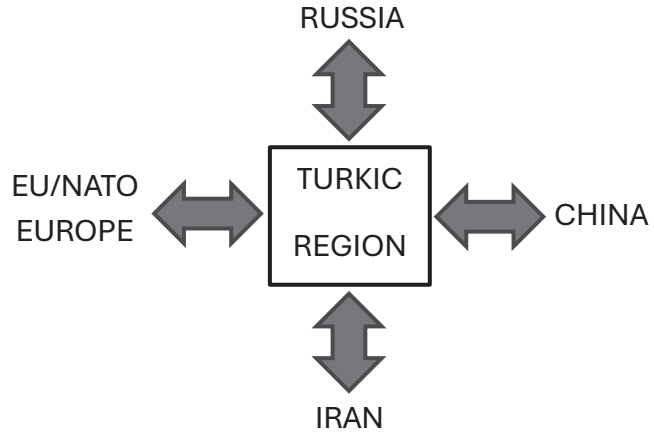


Figure 1: The Turkic Region at the strategic crossroads.

regional developments and rising conventional and non-conventional security risks and challenges”.¹⁵ As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the Turkic Region is at the strategic crossroads involving Russia, China and Iran.¹⁶

Notably, the Arab uprising in 2011 not only initiated a transformation of the regional security order in the Middle East and North Africa but also of Türkiye’s defence strategy. Additional drivers of the change in strategy include Türkiye’s “quest to be an assertive regional player” and its “desire to gain political influence”.¹⁷ Moreover, Türkiye possesses a considerable defence industry.¹⁸ This may have been fundamental when fostering an approach within Turkish foreign policy regarding the use of military power in international relations.¹⁹

Protecting Türkiye’s “interests in a volatile regional and global environment, while also shaping conditions for sustainable peace and development in our neighborhood and beyond” is the overarching aim of Turkish foreign policy. The policy considers Türkiye’s central geographical position a diplomatic strength and describes the OTS as “a successful example of our steps to expand the institutional basis of our foreign relations”. Other prioritised areas of the policy

include strengthening regional ownership of security issues.²⁰ The government describes NATO as “a constant in Turkish foreign, defense and security policy”.²¹

Arguably, Türkiye’s geostrategic location grants it a unique capability to extend NATO’s deterrence posture beyond its current reach. Its proximity to key theatres of geopolitical tension positions Ankara as a conduit for NATO’s aspirations. Since the 1990s, Türkiye has deepened its presence in the region through a multidimensional approach that has gradually evolved from soft-power outreach to a more assertive, security-oriented role.²²

A combination of geopolitical ambitions, economic strategies, ideological affinities, and security imperatives shapes Türkiye’s increasing engagement in the region. Ankara’s long-term objective is to establish itself as a pivotal Eurasian power, and the Middle Corridor initiative, which connects Asia and Europe through Türkiye and bypasses Russian-controlled routes, is a key instrument in achieving this goal.²³ Economically, the region offers vital export markets and strategic transit corridors for energy resources. Culturally, Türkiye draws on shared Turkic heritage to foster political and civilizational affinity, operationalised through institu-

tions like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency. These efforts are complemented by Türkiye's growing leadership in the OTS, which increasingly serves as a forum for political, economic, and security cooperation among Turkic nations.²⁴

Türkiye aims to foster a belt of friendly and stable states to its east, reducing risks of terrorism, regional spillovers, and foreign encroachment, particularly from Russia and China.²⁵ Defence cooperation has become a vital tool in this regard. By deepening economic connectivity, military interoperability, and political alignment with partner states, Ankara not only advances its national interests but also enhances NATO's strategic depth and cohesion on its southeastern flank.²⁶

To conclude, the elaboration above illuminates Türkiye's central role within the Turkic community. Türkiye already plays a key role in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Alliance's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).²⁷ In addition to its political power, Türkiye has an impressive military power at its disposal.²⁸ Türkiye has, over time, proven to be a trustworthy ally, making considerable military contributions to the Alliance's efforts.²⁹ Arguably, not only Türkiye's hard power but also its soft-power is an essential asset for NATO, which should be used properly.

The other Turkic states

Solidifying relations with the Turkic states is among *Azerbaijan's* top foreign policy priorities. The Türkiye-Azerbaijan relationship, encapsulated by the former president Heydar Aliyev's famous dictum 'One Nation, Two States', has transcended rhetoric to become a deeply institutionalised strategic alliance. Türkiye's military and technological support was instrumental in Azerbaijan's

reconquest of significant territories in the 2020 Azerbaijan-Armenia war. Following the war, the Shusha Declaration on allied relations was signed in 2021. The declaration states that the parties, to strengthen their defence capabilities and military security, will cooperate closely. Consequently, Türkiye has remained actively involved in consolidating Azerbaijan's strategic gains. This involvement includes joint military exercises aimed at improving operational interoperability between the two nations' armed forces. Additionally, Türkiye has contributed to demining operations within the regained territories and played a key role in post-conflict reconstruction, including infrastructure development projects. A significant aspect of the evolving alliance is the push for enhanced connectivity, most notably through the Zangezur Corridor, which runs through Armenian territory to connect mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave and, by extension, Türkiye. It promises to shorten trade routes, further integrate the economies, and enhance the viability of the Middle Corridor. Defence industry co-production is another area of cooperation. Azerbaijan has expressed keen interest not only in acquiring more advanced Turkish weaponry but also in establishing joint ventures for the local production and maintenance of Turkish defence systems. While this deepens the strategic interdependence and provides Türkiye with a forward manufacturing and logistics base, it provides Azerbaijan with a robust security guarantor against potential external threats. It significantly reduces its previous reliance on Russia for security mediation in the Karabakh context. Moreover, it aligns Azerbaijan more firmly with Türkiye's regional foreign policy objectives, creating a Turco-Azerbaijani bloc in the Caucasus.³⁰

Kazakhstan, under its multi-vector foreign policy, views Türkiye as a crucial partner in

efforts to diversify its economic, political, and security relationships, thereby mitigating its over-dependence on Russia and China respectively. Ankara and Astana have elevated their ties to an 'Enhanced Strategic Partnership', reflecting growing alignment on various issues. Kazakhstan's foreign policy includes several strategic goals including the ability to maintain an independent foreign policy and promote Kazakhstan in the Central Asian region. Notably, cooperation among Turkic countries is only briefly mentioned in the policy. Moreover, when Kazakhstan presented its vision for the Kazak chairmanship of OTS 2023–2024, none of the prioritised areas included security or foreign policy. However, Kazakhstan's bilateral cooperation with Türkiye encompasses military cooperation as well as regional stability and security. Economically, Türkiye is a significant investor in Kazakhstan's non-energy sectors and a key proponent of the Middle Corridor, in which Kazakhstan plays a pivotal role given its geographic position and logistical infrastructure. The war in Ukraine has heightened the urgency for Kazakhstan to develop reliable alternative transit routes that bypass Russia, making cooperation with Türkiye even more critical. In the defence sphere, cooperation has become more pronounced, and Kazakhstan has shown considerable interest in Turkish defence technology, armoured vehicles, and electronic warfare systems. In 2022, a memorandum of understanding was signed for the joint production of Turkish UAVs in Kazakhstan, marking a significant step towards technology transfer and the enhancement of indigenous defence capabilities. Regular joint military exercises aim to improve interoperability and share expertise. However, Kazakhstan's engagement with Türkiye in security is carefully calibrated. As a founding member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization

(CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Astana maintains deep institutionalised ties with Moscow. Russia also leases the Baikonur Cosmodrome and has other strategic interests in Kazakhstan. The January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan, which saw a brief CSTO intervention, underscored Astana's reliance on this framework, even as it highlighted the desire for greater internal resilience and sovereignty.³¹

The multi-vector foreign policy of *Kyrgyzstan*, established by the republic's first president, Askar Akaev, is characterised by flexible external relations with all of Kyrgyzstan's neighbours and by ambitions to establish favourable relations with Türkiye as well as Russia, China, the EU and the USA. Although Russia has traditionally been Kyrgyzstan's leading security provider, an agreement of 'Friendship and Cooperation' was signed with Türkiye in December 1991. In 1997, Turkish-Kyrgyz ties were further acknowledged in the Treaty of 'Eternal Friendship'. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the USA was allowed to set up an airbase at Manas airport. This was balanced by allowing Russia to lease another airbase. In 2005, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev tried to launch a "bidding war" between Russia and the USA regarding the leasing of the Manas airbase. This led to Russian-backed protests ousting the Bakiyev-administration. In 2012, President Almazbek Atambayev referred to Türkiye as Kyrgyzstan's leading strategic partner and its motherland. This has not only been interpreted as an attempt to decrease Russian influence but also as an ambition to increase Turkish investments. However, President Atambayev concurrently signed a leasing agreement with Russia regarding an airbase and a naval testing facility. The geopolitical and poor economic situation may have prevented the development of a more independent Kyrgyz policy. The border

conflict with Tajikistan in 2021 nevertheless forced Kyrgyzstan to evaluate its foreign policy. Hence, enhanced bilateral security cooperation with Türkiye was identified as an option, and the OTS was identified as another alternative. However, the need for transport corridors, energy supply and external trade made diversification an imperative. Moreover, China's share of Kyrgyzstan's external debt had increased from 5.7 percent in 2010 to almost 50 percent by 2020.³²

Turkmenistan describes itself as permanently neutral while actively contributing to enhancing the effectiveness of various cooperation formats in Central Asia. Since assuming the presidency in 2022, Serdar Berdimuhamedov has favoured a more open foreign policy, especially regarding regional cooperation and Central Asian integration, while bolstering relations with both China and Russia. Clearly, Turkmenistan's substantial natural resources, including the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves, are crucial in this regard. Turkmenistan's policy of permanent neutrality, recognised by the United Nations (UN) in 1995, has historically led to a largely isolationist stance, limiting its participation in regional political or military blocs. However, under its current leadership, Ashgabat has displayed a cautious willingness to expand its foreign engagement, particularly in the economic and energy sectors. It has shown increased interest in the OTS, becoming an observer member in 2021. Türkiye has long championed the idea of a Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline that would bring Turkmen gas across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, connecting to the Southern Gas Corridor and supplying both Türkiye and Europe, thereby diversifying European energy sources away from Russia. While this project has faced numerous political and logistical hurdles for decades, recent geopolitical shifts, including Europe's urgent need to

reduce reliance on Russian gas, have revived discussions. A trilateral summit between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan signalled renewed political will to cooperate on energy transit. Beyond energy, Türkiye is a significant trade partner and investor in Turkmenistan, particularly in the construction sector. Turkish companies have played a major role in shaping Turkmenistan's modern infrastructure. Cultural and educational ties are also fostered, albeit under the tight control of the Turkmen authorities. Direct security cooperation between Türkiye and Turkmenistan is less overt than with other Turkic states, given Ashgabat's neutrality. However, there are likely consultations on regional security threats, particularly instability emanating from Afghanistan, which shares a long, often volatile border with Turkmenistan. Türkiye may offer expertise or non-lethal equipment for border security or counter-terrorism efforts, but such cooperation would be discreet.³³

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has undertaken ambitious domestic reforms and adopted a proactive foreign policy, aiming to reintegrate *Uzbekistan* into the global economy and play a more assertive role in Central Asian affairs. Türkiye has rapidly emerged as a key beneficiary and partner in this transformation, with relations upgraded to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' in 2022. However, the Uzbek national strategy for 2030 emphasises full-scale strategic partnership and alliance in Central Asia as well as expansion of the existing strategic partnership with other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Notably, OTS is not mentioned in the strategy. Nevertheless, bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Türkiye continue to improve, potentially aiming to establish a strategic partnership on regional stability. Uzbekistan, which withdrew from the CSTO in 2012, has

been looking to diversify its defence partners and modernise its largely Soviet-era military equipment. Hence, Türkiye has become an attractive option. Both countries have signed agreements on military-technical cooperation and defence industry collaboration with the Uzbeks primarily interested in Turkish UAVs, armoured vehicles, and communication systems. Moreover, joint military exercises have become more regular, hence focusing on counterterrorism and special operations. Despite this deepening partnership, Uzbekistan maintains a cautious and pragmatic approach to security alliances. While Tashkent recently signed an ‘Agreement on Allied Relations’ with Azerbaijan, Uzbek officials have been quick to clarify that this does not mean joining the Shusha Declaration or forming a trilateral military alliance with Türkiye and Azerbaijan against any specific third party. Uzbekistan values its sovereignty highly and is wary of being drawn into formal military blocs that could limit its foreign policy manoeuvrability or antagonise other major powers, including Russia and China, with whom it maintains significant political, economic, and security relationships.³⁴

Policy Recommendations: Operationalising Türkiye’s Strategic Leverage for NATO

Türkiye is not only a linchpin on NATO’s southeastern flank, but it is the Alliance’s most viable conduit into Eurasia’s contested heartland. By empowering Türkiye as both a hard- and soft-power multiplier, NATO can extend its strategic perimeter without direct confrontation, enhance Eurasian resilience to Russian coercion, and operationalise a doctrine of functional containment. To effectively contain Russian, Chinese and Iranian influence across Eurasia, NATO must

recalibrate its regional engagement strategy by leveraging Türkiye’s unique geopolitical position, ethno-political ties, and growing leadership in the OTS-community.

Although this article focuses on NATO’s efforts to contain Russia, it is rather obvious that the Alliance must work closely with both the EU and the US to regain lost influence in Eurasia on behalf of Russia, China, and Iran. Based on the preceding analysis, I therefore recommend the establishment of a strategic partnership between NATO and Türkiye, formalised in an agreement and focusing on the following three policy actions:

Leverage Türkiye in NATO’s Out-of-Area Deterrence Architecture

To formalise Türkiye’s role as a forward-operating actor in the Alliance’s strategic depth beyond Article 5 borders, NATO should:

- Embedding Türkiye’s bilateral security initiatives with its OTS-partners into NATO’s partnership planning.
- Institutionalising Türkiye’s engagement within the OTS through observer or liaison frameworks under NATO’s partnership tools.
- Supporting Türkiye’s leadership in functional deterrence operations (e.g., ISR sharing, hybrid threat monitoring) across the OTS-community.

Expand Defence-Industrial Cooperation with Türkiye and OTS Partners

To dilute Russian defence dependencies across Eurasia, NATO should:

- Encourage NATO members to collaborate with Türkiye’s defence industry on joint ventures, promoting co-production and technology transfer for surveillance and cyber capabilities.

- Provide NATO-supported logistical and capacity-building assistance for Türkiye-led defence industrial projects in the other OTS-members.
- Support Türkiye's use of NATO standard platforms as the basis for interoperability with its OTS-partners.

Develop a NATO–Türkiye–OTS Engagement Platform

To operationalise strategic coherence, NATO should:

- Establish a semi-formal NATO–Türkiye–OTS Track 1.5 dialogue focused on regional security coordination, modelled on the ICI.
- Host annual NATO-supported security workshops with OTS-members, focusing on hybrid threat resilience, defence logistics, and infrastructure protection.
- Integrate OTS-members into NATO exercises and capacity-building programs without formal membership, ensuring flexibility and political feasibility.

Clearly, these recommendations are not unproblematic. First, there are no guarantees that Türkiye, or any other member, always will act in line with the interests of

the Alliance. Türkiye's position within NATO has, in addition, sometimes been considered as controversial, not least regarding its relations with Greece. On the other hand, there are no guarantees either, that if NATO apply a passive approach, Türkiye will follow example. Hence, it is regarded better to have Türkiye acting within the frames of the Alliance than outside on its own as it occasionally has in, for example, Syria. Second, the recommendations will most likely be viewed with scepticism in Moscow, Beijing and Teheran. But why letting the preferences of these main adversaries of the Alliance dictate NATO-policy? And is not containing and deterring each and one of them per se about acting against the interests of, for example, Kreml? Consequently, proactive rather than continued reactive measures are considered preferable when recommending the use of ethno-politics in the service of the Alliance.

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Notes

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