

## **Fostering Hope through Hoops: The Potential of Basketball Sports Diplomacy**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the potential of basketball to be used as a form of sports diplomacy. The article argues that U.S.-China relations have soured over the past few decades, with relations between the two countries becoming notably more tense amidst rising tariffs issued against each. The authors show that basketball has a longstanding history in each country, as well as a widespread following, making it an ideal candidate for assisting in achieving diplomatic goals. The article points out that more traditional diplomatic negotiations have failed, presenting an opportunity for the “backdoor” negotiations that sports diplomacy can foster. To make this argument, this article provides a historical overview of successful cases of sports diplomacy, citing previous examples like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. It is careful to acknowledge the drawbacks of sports diplomacy as well, presenting the reader with a balanced understanding of what this political tool can and cannot do.

*Keywords:* sports diplomacy, United States, China, basketball, soft power

### **Author Summary**

This article asks how sports, specifically basketball, can be used to promote peaceful relations between China and the U.S. This article traces the history of the relationship between the two countries and presents cases of previous instances in which sports have been used to deescalate international hostilities. In this review, however, it is careful to identify cases where sports diplomacy inadvertently made conditions worse or caused outright conflict. Furthermore, while this article focuses primarily on U.S.-China relations since they are a timely political concern, the hope is that these methods for promoting peace can be applied to many other global conflicts.

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Such conflicts include those between Israel and Palestine, those throughout the country of Lebanon, and those between India and Pakistan. Essentially, this article argues that when traditional avenues of diplomacy fail, sports may serve as an effective, yet often overlooked, means of creating a more peaceful world.

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Some of the more recent headlines featured in major news outlets like *Time Magazine* include “How Both Trump and Xi Can Stop a Trade War” (Brilliant, 2025) and CBS News’ “China’s Retaliatory Tariffs Are a Direct Hit to U.S. Farmers” (Cerullo, 2025). Regardless of the specific angle of the story, or the focus of the particular news organization’s coverage, a common theme of rising tensions between the U.S. and China have been at the center of the national and global media. The increased attention placed on international relations between the two countries comes after U.S. President Trump issued 25% tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada, and 10% tariffs on imports from China (The White House, 2025). Then, in a retaliatory measure, China issued its own set of tariffs, primarily targeting U.S. agricultural products (Cerullo, 2025). The back-and-forth punitive actions between the two countries is what has contributed to the impression that tensions between the two are at an all time high.

The truth is, however, that strained relations between the U.S. and China have waxed and waned over several decades and long proceeded the most recent “trade war.” In the past 20 years, relations have soured due to allegations that Chinese hackers have stolen sensitive U.S. technology and proprietary trade secrets (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2025). Even farther back than this, the U.S. and China navigated the delicate tension between outright adversaries and more implicit competitors as they each vied for their place on the world’s stage.

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The Second Cold War, which took place during the 1970s, was marked by intense and often hostile rivalry between the two countries as they competed for dominance in infrastructure, the digital sphere, production, and finance (Schindler et al., 2023).

More recent than that, in the late 1980s, the landmark event in Tiananmen Square solidified what were already souring relations between the two nations. In June of 1989, Chinese authorities forcibly quelled pro-democracy protests. The military action taken against civilians resulted in hundreds of deaths and seemed an egregious gesture from China on its stance on democracy, and all democratic nations (like the U.S.). In response to the action the nation had taken, and similar to the present day, the U.S. issued economic sanctions and put a hold on all diplomatic negotiations (Foot & Walker, 2010). While these sanctions and hiatus on negotiations have been lifted and then re-instituted at various junctures, the underlying tensions have persisted. In other words, troublesome international relations between the two countries are nothing new. The question is, given that these countries are often in conflict with one another, how can their leaders and representatives ameliorate this fraught relationship? One promising solution, again, encourages scholars to look to the past—to sports diplomacy.

With this method for easing hostile international relations, sports are used to broker “backdoor negotiations” between sparring nations and even improve the public perception of the respective countries. Sports diplomacy is the focus of the present article, which aims to examine how one sport, basketball, may be used to pacify tense U.S.-China relations that seem to be only escalating. The article begins by defining sports diplomacy and by analyzing previous cases of sports diplomacy in action. It then moves the discussion from sports more generally conceived to basketball in particular, examining how this sport has exerted global influence in the interest of foreign affairs. To provide a more holistic overview of the topic, the article then makes it a point

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to consider where this tactic falls short by introducing criticisms of the practice. Finally, the article concludes by proposing basketball sports diplomacy as a possible avenue for collaboration between at-odds countries like the U.S. and China.

### **Sports Diplomacy throughout the Ages**

Many scholars have argued that sports are inherently political, emphasizing that sports and politics are deeply intertwined and are incapable of existing in distinct spheres. The modern entanglement of these two realms can be traced back to the late 19th century, which saw the revival of the Olympic Games of Ancient Greece. As Guttman (2003) notes, rather than simply providing a platform for demonstrating athletic prowess or skillful mastery of a particular sport, the Olympics quickly evolved into a means for conducting political demonstrations and placing international rivalries at the fore of the public's attention. During the Cold War, this practice continued and was further solidified, through a process of what Keys (2003) refers to as the "sportification" of international relations. With such sportification, the geopolitical rivalry characterizing the relationship between global superpowers like the United States and the Soviet Union extended beyond the world of policy and into the world of sports.

### **Sports Diplomacy: From Military Might to "Soft Power"**

To better understand the intersection of sports and international relations, it is helpful to consider the theoretical framework of "soft power" (Nye, 2004). In outlining his notion of soft power and how it differs from power more generally, Nye (2023) claims that power has historically been measured by "strength in war" (p. 4). Now, however, considerations for "technology, education, and economic growth" (p. 4) are becoming more significant when it comes to determining a nation's power. As the above distinction suggests, integral to the concept of "soft power" is the idea that influencing others occurs through attraction rather than coercion;

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it is implicit rather than explicit, covert as opposed to overt. It is the nonconfrontational and roundabout nature of soft power that has encouraged others to think about how vehicles of soft power (e.g., sports) can be utilized as a diplomatic tool.

For those studying sports as an instrument of soft power, athletic success is seen as potentially enhancing a nation's global reputation, and by extension, their international standing. According to Grix and Lee (2013), sports are an ideal vehicle for "people-to-people diplomacy." Under these circumstances, international negotiations are seen as being blocked by the motivations and interests of politicians, which do not always align with the views and goals of the general public. Murray and Pigman (2014) elaborate on what sports diplomacy offers that traditional diplomatic channels cannot, emphasizing that sports provide a "low politics" environment—that is, a less formal and lower-stakes setting—where countries can interact with one another without the pressure that often accompanies more conventional diplomatic negotiations. For this reason, Rofer (2016) identifies sports diplomacy as an increasingly important component of public diplomacy strategies, particularly for middle powers seeking to enhance their international influence. As one example of a "middle power," China has attempted to employ sports as an instrument of diplomacy, with one of the most often-cited examples of sports diplomacy being the 1971 U.S.-China ping-pong exchange. This classic example of sports diplomacy was touted as an effective tool for cooling heated international relations between the two countries, and scholars like Itoh (2011) and Carter and Sugden (2012) credit this seemingly insignificant event as a turning point in Cold War diplomacy. In fact, commenting on this landmark event in international relations, Murray (2020) even goes so far as to claim that "Ping-Pong diplomacy paved the way for U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger's July 1971 visit and the more famous visit by U.S. President Richard Nixon in February 1972" (p. 1).

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More than just offering an opportunity for sparring nations to meet on a more neutral and amicable footing, sports diplomacy also presents as an occasion for what Anholt (2007) terms “nation branding.” Much like a corporation attempts to infuse its brand with integrity, value, and high regard through careful impression management, Anholt argues that individual countries attempt to do something similar when it comes to their international image.

Pigman (2014), for instance, explored the nation branding Qatar engaged in when it leveraged its hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to establish diplomatic relationships and enhance its secure position in the Middle East. Even a few years prior to that, with the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Russia utilized the event to challenge damaging global narratives of the nation, instead presenting itself as a competent and confident country, full of national pride (Haut, 2024). Russia’s use of sports diplomacy during the FIFA World Cup was a continuation, however, of similar efforts previously initiated during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. In his article, “Nation Branding of Russia through the Sochi Olympic Games of 2014,” Ostrapenko (2010) claims that in hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics, Russia was able to grant public access into an obtuse and otherwise off-limits nation. As he puts it, Russia has always been “portrayed as grand, mysterious, and unfortunately dark” (p. 62), and government officials saw the Winter Olympics as an opportunity to challenge these perceptions. As these examples collectively demonstrate, sporting mega-events like the World Cup and the Olympics are often regarded by both hosting and visiting countries as a pathway for rebranding a tarnished national image.

In other cases, though, the motivation for using sports as a diplomatic tool has less to do with rebranding than it does with establishing a brand—or a global presence—in the first place. Koch (2018) claims that the forging of an identity was necessary for many central Asian countries in the wake of the Soviet Union, when these countries were grappling with questions of

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who they were, and who they wanted to portray themselves to be, if they were no longer part of the Union. In these “hybrid regimes” as Garamvölgyia et al. (2021) refer to them, formerly Soviet nations in the Balkan region, like Hungary and Montenegro, participated in the Olympics and the International Table Tennis Competitions, respectively, as a way to assert a new, more individualized identities. For nations such as these, international sporting events were therefore seen as what Grix et al. (2019) describe as a “Coming-Out Party,” where newly sovereign or recently formed nations could announce their arrival to the world’s stage. In fact, a “Coming-Out Party” is the exact language the authors use to describe the function that the 2008 Beijing Olympics in China, which worked in the interest of signaling the nation’s development and aided in realizing their diplomatic ambitions. According to the authors, China’s hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics then set the stage for subsequent international collaborations outside of the sporting arena, most notably its 2013 “One Belt, One Belt Initiative,” a strategy designed to connect China with the rest of the world through integrated infrastructure. The One Belt, One Road initiative, however, is just one of many policy innovations that sports laid the groundwork for.

Whether its ping pong, soccer, or assorted sports as in the case of the Olympics, as the above research has shown, sports diplomacy has proven an effective method for easing international relations, and even resulted in the formation of multinational policy changes and collaborations. It stands to reason, though, that the sport in question may actually make a difference here. In other words, if a particular sport already has a foothold within a country—if it already has mass appeal—such popularity could be leveraged to aid in anything from peace talks and ceasefires to more amicable economic policy. It is for this reason (i.e., widespread



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popularity) that this article investigates the historical use of basketball, specifically, as a historical and potential diplomatic tool.

### **Basketball as an Ideal Candidate for Sports Diplomacy**

Ever since James Naismith first hung peach baskets in that Massachusetts gymnasium in 1891, basketball has become a fixture of American culture. However, the influence of basketball soon grew beyond the state of Massachusetts and the United States as whole due to the international missionary work of the Young Men's Christian Academy (YMCA), and later, the foreign military personnel and G.I.s playing the game on bases overseas (Krasnoff, 2018). This, combined with the values the sport is often said to embody (e.g., teamwork, perseverance, and hard work), helped basketball transcend culturally specific contexts to achieve international appeal.

Other factors that led basketball to earn the status as what *The Washington Post* calls the “world's second-biggest sport” (Krasnoff, 2018) include accessibility. In a more literal sense, basketball is accessible in that it requires little equipment and can be played in diverse conditions, which have allowed it to be adopted in not only diverse geographical settings, but across all levels of socioeconomic status (Goldstein, 2020). Figuratively speaking, basketball as a game was conceptually accessible as well. As Wang (2019) notes, basketball's easy-to-learn set of rules allowed it to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. In other words, you did not need to speak English to appreciate the sport.

Collectively, these qualities of the sport enabled it gain further traction during the 1950s and 1960s, when the U.S. State Department sponsored the Harlem Globetrotters' tour of Eastern Bloc nations. In this strategic move to exemplify American athleticism and racial integration, this decision was seen as a significant milestone towards diplomacy during the Cold War. Hunt's

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(2019) research indicates that these tours were intended to undermine the Soviet propaganda circulating at the time, which portrayed the U.S. as racist and backward, instead offering up a picture of an inclusive America abroad. LaFeber's (2002) study documents how basketball's global reach accelerated dramatically following the Cold War, with the 1992 Olympic "Dream Team" serving as a defining moment in the history of basketball globalization and sports diplomacy.

Using basketball to refashion America's identity in this way continued well past the conclusion of the Cold War. But here it was not the United States wielding basketball to challenge existing narratives, but countries in the Eastern Bloc—countries that the Harlem Globetrotters had visited just a few decades before. In post-Soviet Lithuania, for instance, the country won the bronze medal in basketball during the 1992 Olympic games, a feat which became a symbol of national distinction, separating the new Lithuanian identity from its Soviet past (Carlson, 2011). Something similar occurred in the Balkans, where Brentin and Cooley (2016) argue that basketball success during the post-Yugoslav era served as a narrative of resistance, challenging negative global portrayals of the region. This is why, as Tan (2015) points out, governments worldwide have dedicated significant funding to basketball associations, operating on the belief that success on the court directly translates to prominence on the world's stage.

But this implementation of basketball for building and rebuilding national identities is not restricted to Europe and the Global North. In her book, *Basketball Empire: France and the Making of a Global NBA and WMBA*, Krasnoff (2018) examined how basketball was implemented in parts of Africa previously under French colonial rule in such a way that diplomatic goals were brought in line with commercial interests. The United States has likewise

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regarded basketball as an instrument for advancing their political and commercial goals on the continent. A leading example is the NBA's Basketball Without Borders program, which blends sport development with diplomatic messaging. Through ethnographic work with program participants, Shull (2020) demonstrates how these camps—including the development camp initiated in Africa in 2003—can serve both humanitarian and commercial functions, nurturing local talent while fostering goodwill and expanding the NBA's global reach. In fact, representatives from the Sports Diplomacy Division at the U.S. Department of State, such as Jennifer Foltz, state explicitly, “Our sports programs are not just about sports” (U.S. Mission Nigeria, 2022). Falcous and Maguire (2011) describe this dual function of basketball programs, such as those initiated by the U.S. Department of State and the Basketball Africa league as adopting what they call “bifocal national imagery,” in which sports diplomacy initiatives project a national identity to both internal and international audiences simultaneously.

Looking specifically to the East, the widespread influence of basketball has been cultivated and nurtured for several decades. As far back as 1979, there began a budding interest in the sport when the then-Chinese Communist leader, Deng Xiaoping, visited the U.S., during which time he attended an NBA game. This motivated him to invite the American teams to tour China in an act of soft power (Nye, 2004). To spur on Chinese interest in professional basketball, in 1987, the NBA granted broadcasting rights to China Central Television (CCTV) free of charge (Li, 2018). This decision then paved the way for the creation of the Chinese Basketball Association in 1995 (Haitao, 2020). The popularity of basketball in China only grew with the meteoric rise to stardom of “homegrown” talent like Yao Ming. Qingmin (2013) explains the influence of Ming in the following terms:

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In sports diplomacy, the athlete can play the role of diplomat, an occurrence that is best epitomized by Yao Ming, a Chinese basketball player in the American NBA. Yao Ming continued the spirit of ping-pong diplomacy, but also gave sports diplomacy several new features that are indicative of the changing diplomatic environment. (p. 228)

Partially due to the celebrity status achieved by breakout stars like Ming, those at the NBA started to more seriously consider the profitability of growing the fanbase. The integration of professional basketball with Chinese society and the country's political landscape then came to blend political and commercial interests in unprecedented ways. The NBA's global strategy, its operations in China included, is a prime example of "multi-stakeholder diplomacy," which Pigman (2014) defines as a type of diplomacy where state (e.g., government officials and policymakers) and non-state actors collaborate to achieve shared goals. In the case of China, the NBA wanted to promote the influence of basketball to expand their market of potential consumers, and the U.S. government wanted greater influence so as to facilitate international agreements. The problem with multi-stakeholder diplomacy, though, is that, sometimes, the balance between diplomatic and commercial goals can become upset, with the scales tipping in the favor of one side or the other. The next section explores this downside to sports diplomacy in greater depth, as it considers the practice's various drawbacks.

### **Sports Diplomacy's Flaws & Failings**

A primary disadvantage of sports diplomacy becomes apparent when such efforts appear overly focused on commercialism. Gems et al. (2017) assert that whereas during the Cold War-era, sports diplomacy was centered around showcasing "athletic Americanism," the tone has now shifted to "corporate Americanism," where national teams now aim to represent, and often reconcile, patriotic values with commercial interests. Efforts geared towards national identity

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building can therefore be undermined if excessive commercialization is seen as the true motivation behind a particular sporting event or initiative. Dubinsky (2021), for instance, looks at how America's "brand," as well as its cultural diplomacy, suffered with its hosting of Super Bowl LV. The event was portrayed in international media as "tone deaf" in the wake of the significant loss of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States was depicted as being overly motivated by capitalist pursuits (given that the Super Bowl is often seen as the epitome of capitalism due to high advertising and marketing costs), and not focused on placing enough value on human life and humanitarian concerns.

Another critique of sports diplomacy does not have to do with the clash between profit-driven or diplomatic pursuits, but rather when diplomatic or commercial goals do not align with cultural values. Therefore, while scholars like Allison and Monnington (2015) suggest that sports diplomacy can build "cultural bridges" between nations, there are admittedly times when it can also erect walls dividing them. The 2019 controversy involving Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey—who publicly supported Hong Kong protesters—is a case in point. Morey's post sparked a backlash in China, resulting in suspended broadcasts and extensive financial fallout (Deb & Stein, 2019). This incident effectively put the tension between cultural ideals around free expression, sports diplomacy, and commercial interests under the microscope. Deb and Draper (2019) reported on the incident, reflecting on how the NBA's attempts to smooth things over with both Chinese and American stakeholders ended up leaving both parties dissatisfied. Nevertheless, the NBA's decision to resume preseason games in China by 2025 reflects a strategic attempt to rebuild diplomatic and cultural ties through soft power.

Other issues with sports diplomacy arise with accusations of "sportswashing." Boykoff (2022) defines sportswashing as "a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear

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important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front” (p. 342). Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup was seen as a classic example of sportwashing, as on the soccer field, critics say that attendees were supposed to forget or simply ignore the fact that Qatar’s government operates as an authoritarian regime that is in opposition to democratic values (Grix et al., 2023). Following this, other scholars have accused countries like Russia (Meyer, 2024) as doing something similar to compensate for its human rights violations, and China for its restrictions on free speech (Edelman, 2024). Accusations of sportwashing to repair a nation’s image that has been tarnished by human rights violations or other abuses is what have prompted scholars like Murray (2018) to critique the “sports autonomy principle,” which supposes that sports and politics can be separate. For him, high-profile international events inevitably become stages for political expression.

Finally, the last, and possibly most important, point to consider is that sports may, at times, exacerbate existing tensions. This was the case with El Salvador and Honduras in 1969 with the emergence of the so-called “Football Wars” that occurred during the FIFA World Cup qualifying matches that year. The two countries were already at odds over immigration policies and economic inequality, and the matches brought these longstanding issues to a head. Fights between fans at the games eventually gave way to a four-day-long military conflict, and though researchers like Kapuscinski (2013) are careful to point out that soccer was not the lone cause of the conflict, it did play a significant role in reaching its tipping point.

Another friendly sports match that turned deadly occurred with the “Blood in the Water” polo match between Hungary and the USSR during the 1956 Olympics. The match took place just weeks after the USSR had quashed the Hungarian Revolution, and the resentment and

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tension translated to the water. One USSR player punched another Hungarian player in the face, resulting in blood streaming down his face—hence the name of the event. Shortly after, the crowd broke out in a riot, and the game had to be stopped early. So, rather than demonstrating that the two countries could be amicable, the event only reassured the public that these two nations were fundamentally enemies (Espy, 1981).

### **Future Possibilities for Basketball & Backdoor Negotiations**

While sports diplomacy has some problems, it does present as a potential avenue for “backdoor” negotiations, when traditional avenues have failed. With international relations between the U.S. and China becoming increasingly more tense, and with retaliatory tariffs being issued on both sides for the other not meeting their demands, these two countries may be ideal candidates for sports diplomacy. Since, as this essay has shown, basketball has a strong foothold in each country, it may therefore make for the ideal sport for facilitating such diplomacy.

Furthermore, there is reason to believe that applications of basketball diplomacy could extend beyond just U.S.-China relations. Conflicts rooted in religion and geopolitical disputes, such as those between Israel and Palestine and India and Pakistan, have received increasing attention within the media cycle and the general public’s conversation. Given the historical success and potential promise of sports diplomacy among U.S.-China relations, it seems logical that these advantages could be witnessed in other contexts. Presently, one program pursuing such objectives is PeacePlayers International—a grassroots organization designed to use basketball to broker dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian young people. Research conducted on the efficacy of such programs in achieving their goals shows that basketball has proven an effective tool for negating intergroup stereotypes (Doubilet, 2010).

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While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is both a religious-based conflict and a territorial dispute, basketball as a means of sports diplomacy for conflicts that are almost exclusively over religious division has also historically proven fruitful. The case of Northern Ireland effectively illustrates basketball's ability to ease religious-based conflict, as it did with the Protestant Irish and the Catholic Irish. In Ireland, soccer was the sport with the greatest following, but it was also symbolically loaded; basketball, on the other hand, possessed a comparatively neutral cultural identity that was able to transcend social structures that were traditionally segregated. This same program mentioned above, PeacePlayers, did well to forge interpersonal connections on both sides of the conflict (Mitchell et al., 2021).

Lebanon and India likewise serve as “success stories” of basketball bridging divides along the lines of religion. In Lebanon in the 90s and 2000s, basketball was credited with temporarily halting conflicts occurring among Sunni, Shia, and Christian communities (Mitchell et al., 2016). Within Asia, where Hindu-Muslims tensions have been escalating for decades, the South Asian Basketball Association (SABA) has employed youth tournaments and “friendlies” on neutral ground to ease tensions (Coalter, 2007). In this setting, basketball was the ideal choice because the countries' most popular sport, cricket, was culturally loaded in much the same way that soccer was in Ireland, as the abovementioned “cricket conflicts” of the 1990s demonstrate.

As these diverse examples prove, basketball as a means of promoting peace knows no cultural bounds, nor is it confined to the type of conflict at hand—political, religious, or other. That said, it is worth reiterating that basketball, or sports in general, do not represent a “fix all” for the world's problems; it is just one tool in the pacifist's arsenal, to be used in conjunction with many others. Yet, as history has demonstrated, they may help to work in the interest of



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devising solutions that are mutually beneficial for all countries involved, and can play a fundamental role in helping to bring forth equality and justice on an international scale.

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