





## BRENT SCOWCROFT CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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ALEX WARD IS A STAFF WRITER OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND DEFENSE AT VOX. BEFORE JOINING VOX, HE WAS AN ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR AT THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL'S BRENT SCOWCROFT CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY, WHERE HE WORKED ON US DEFENSE STRATEGY, POLICY, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS. HE TWEETS AT @ALEXWARDVOX.

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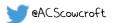
THANK YOU TO THE KOREA FOUNDATION FOR THE GENERAL SUPPORT, ALLOWING THE AUTHOR TO TRAVEL TO KOREA TWICE FOR LEARNING AND RESEARCH. A SPECIAL THANKS TO TROY STANGARONE AT THE KOREA ECONOMIC INSTITUTE FOR HELPING TO GUIDE THE PROJECT AND HIS MENTOR SHIP THROUGHOUT.

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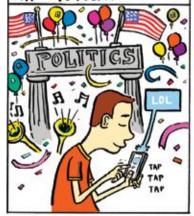
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JULY 2017



THERE'S A BELIEF THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE APATHETIC ABOUT THE FUTURE, ESPECIALLY AS IT RELATES TO POLITICS.



THIS SEEMS SOMEWHAT TRUE ABOUT MILLENIALS — BOTH IN THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH KOREA.



I HAVE FOUND, HOWEVER, THAT THIS APATHY DOESN'T STOP BOTH YOUNG AMERICANS AND SOUTH KOREANS FROM HAVING OPINIONS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEIR TWO COUNTRIES.



I SPENT TIME IN 2016 AND 2017
INTERVIEWING YOUNG PROFESSIONALS
IN AMERICA AND THE REPUBLIC
OF KOREA (ROK) ABOUT THEIR
THOUGHTS ON US-ROK RELATIONS.



THESE YOUNG PROFESSIONIALS MIGHT JUST HAVE THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL ORDER IN THEIR HANDS FOR A SIMPLE REASON:



THEY WILL VOTE IN THE COMING DECADES.







IN KOREA, THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT BATTLE OVER WHETHER OR NOT THEY WANT TO BE NICER TO NORTH KOREA OR WORK MORE CLOSELY WITH CHINA.



IN THE UNITED STATES, THERE'S A GROWING BATTLE BETWEEN THOSE WHO WANT THE U S TO ENGAGE WITH THE WORLD, ESPECIALLY WITH ALLIES AND PARTNERS - LIKE SOUTH KOREAND THOSE WHO WOULD RATHER LOOK INWARD AND TAKE (AREOF ISSUES AT HOME.



IT'S NO SECRET THAT CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES HAVE DIFFERENT OPINIONS ABOUT WORLD ORDER.



SOUTH KOREA, MEANWHILE, IS CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THESE TWO GREAT POWERS.



AND THOUGH IT HAS ALWAYS SOUGHT TO BALANCE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES, IT MAY BE FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THEM.



AFTER ALL, CHINA IS SOUTH KOREA'S MOST IMPORTANT ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP, WHILE THE UNITED STATES PROVIDES ITS SECURITY BACKING.



THEREFORE, IT'S IN SOUTH KOREA'S CURRENT INTEREST TO MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONS WITH BOTH COUNTRIES.



BUT TIMES CHANGE. CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES MAY COME TO HAVE A MORE CONFRONTATIONAL RELATIONSHIP, AS PREDICTED BY WHITE HOUSE CHIEF STRATEGIST STEVE BANNON.



THEREFORE, WHEN THESE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS
HEAD TO THE BALLOT BOX NOW AND IN THE
FUTURE, THEY WILL BE CHOOSING BETWEEN
LEADERS WHO HAVE DIFFERING OPINIONS
ABOUT RELATIONS WITH CHINA AND THE U.S.



WHICH COUNTRY SOUTH KOREA OPTS TO ALIGN ITSELF WITH WILL BE AN INDICATION ABOUT WHICH COUNTRY SOUTH KOREA FINDS TO BE THE STRONGEST AND MOST LIKELY LEADER OF THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER.



THEREFORE, SOUTH KOREA WILL BE THE GLOBAL ORDER'S BELLWETHER. IN ESSENCE, WHERE KOREA CHOOSES TO GO, SO WILL WORLD ORDER.



IN MY CONVERSATIONS WITH THESE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS WE DISCUSSED THE MAIN THEMES ABOUT US-ROK RELATIONS, INCLUDING QUESTIONS SUCH AS:



IN 20 YEARS, WILL KOREA CHOOSE TO WORK MORE CLOSELY WITH CHINA OR THE UNITED STATES?









MY CONVERSATIONS WERE WITH YOUNG PROFESSIONALS OF MANY BACKGROUNDS. SOME INCLUDED GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN BOTH COUNTRIES BUT ALSO HAIRDRESSERS, JOURNALISTS, TECHNOLOGISTS, ECONO -MISTS, AND MORE.



SOME WERE WELL EDUCATED, SOME WERE NOT. I AM UNDER NOTILUSION THAT THIS IS A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE, BUT MY CONVERSATIONS PROVIDE SOME CONTEXT TO THE CURRENT DEBATE,...



...BREWING AMONG YOUNG AMERICANS AND KOREANS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP, AND, IN ESSENSE, THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL ORDER.



# THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

IT'S NOT WORTH SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON THE CURRENT CONTEXT FOR TWO REASONS: IT IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING, AND WHAT THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN AMERICA AND SOUTH KOREA HAD TO SAY IS FAR MORE INTERESTING.

HOWEVER.



FIRST, THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH KOREA HAVE BEEN STAUNCH ALLIES SINCE THE KOREAN WAR IN



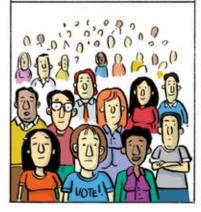
WASHINGTON PROVIDES SEOUL WITH SECURITY AND ECONOMIC BACKING, AND SEOUL PROVIDES WASHINGTON WITH A NORTHEAST ASIAN ALLY, A PLACE TO STATION ITS TROOPS, AND ACCESS TO A CAPITALIST MARKET.



BOTH GOVERNMENTS USUALLY AGREE, WITH NATURAL EBB AND FLOW, THAT IT IS IN THEIR BEST INTERESTS TO KEEP THE RELATIONSHIP GOING.



BUT, BOTH COUNTRIES ARE DEMOCRACIES, AND THE PEOPLE THAT ULTIMATELY DE-CIDE THE RELATIONSHIPS FUTURE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO WILL VOTE FOR YEARS TO COME: YOUNG AMERICANS AND KOREAKS



SECOND, NORTH KOREA'S INCREASED AGGRESSIVENESS PUT THE RELATIONSHIP BACK ON THE MAP. NORTH KOREA HAS BEEN TESTING MISSILES AT AN INCREASED CLIP IN RECENT YEARS WITH THE AIM BEING ANUCLEAR WARHEAD ON AN INTERCONTINENTAL BALLISTIC MISSILE THAT CAN REACH THEUNITED STATES.



PYONGYANG ALREADY HAS AN ABILITY TO HARM U.S. REGIONAL ALLIES LIKE SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN WITH SHORTER-RANGE PROJECTILES, BUT THE TRUE VICTORY FOR KIM JONG-UN'S NORTH KOREA WOULD BE THE OPTION TO STRIKE AMERICAN TERRITORY.



NORTH KOREA'S BELLIGERENCE PLAYED A
PROMINENT ROLE IN SOUTH KOREA'S
LATEST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.
LIBERAL POLITICIAN MOON JAE-IN CAME
OUT VICTORIOUS AFTER THE PREVIOUS
PRESIDENT, PARK GEUN-HYE, WAS



MOON ADVOCATES FOR A MORE CONCILIATORY STANCE TOWARD NORTH KOREA IN DIRECT CONTRAST TO US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S MORE HARDLINE APPROACH.



THIS MAY PUT A WEDGE BETWEEN THE TWO ADMINISTRATIONS IN HOW THEY APPROACH THE NORTH KOREAN PROBLEM. HOWEVER, BOTH SIDES HAVE THE SAME GOAL IN MIND: AN END TO THE NORTH KOREAN THREAT.





## WHAT KOREANS SAID

I TRAVELED TO SOUTH KOREA IN THE SUMMER OF 2016 TO INTERVIEW YOUNG KOREANS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE: HAIRDRESSERS, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, STUDENTS, AND MORE.



IN GENERAL, NONE OF THEM SHOWED ANY DISDAIN TOWARD THE UNITED STATES. THEY WERE PROUDOF THEIR COUNTRY'S AFFILIATION WITH AMERICA AND THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE US-ROK TIES PLAYED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH KOREA.



BUT, THEY ALL WERE LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE, AND WHAT THEY SAW WAS AN AMERICA THAT COULD NOT COMPETE WITH CHINA'S INTEREST IN SOUTH KOREA AND ITS REGIONAL STAYING POWER—THAT IS, CHINA IS IN THE REGION WHILE THE UNITED STATES IS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN.



IN THE END, THE GENERAL TAKEAWAY WAS THAT SOUTH KOREA SHOULD MAINTAIN STRONG TIES TO THE UNITED STATES.



BUT THAT CHINA WAS GOING TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY IN SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE.



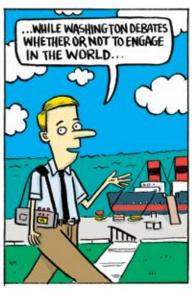
IT WAS IN THE MIDST OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, AND THIS
STUDENT SAW THE KINDS OF COMMENTS MADE BY THEN-CANDIDATE
DOWN OF TRUMP



YET, HE CLAIMED THE "TRUMP PHEN-OMENON" WAS NOT NEW AND THAT AMERICA HAD PROVEN TIME AND AGAIN THAT IT HAD AN ISOLATIONIST STREAK. INSTEAD, WHAT WORRIES HIM IS THAT...







... CHINA CONTINUES TO USE GEO-GRAPHY TO ITS ADVANTAGE.



CHINA HAS MASSIVE SWAY OVER THE KOREAN ECONOMY, INCLUDING BUYING UP PARTS OF KOREA'S ONCE GREAT SHIP BUILDING PROWESS.



AND EVEN INFILTRATING THE K-POP MARKET, WITH SOME K-POP STARS NOW HAVING TO LEARN MANDARIN.



ANOTHER STUDENT AGREED, BUTIN A DIFFERENT WAY. HE PROPOSED A HYPOTHETICAL: SUPPOSE THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP CONTINUES TO GO WELL, CHINA REMAINS AT BAY, AND THE NORTH AND SOUTH UNIFY...



... WHAT THEN FOR AMERICA?



AT THAT POINT, THE UNITED STATES CAN CONTINUE TO HAVE ECONOMIC TIES, BUT THE SECURITY RELATIONSHIP—THE BACKBONE OF THE ALLIANCE—WILL CORWAY.



THAT'S BECAUSE BEIJING WILL NEVER ALLOW FOR A US MILITARY PRESENSE ON CHINA'S BORDER.



AND WHILE UNIFICATION MIGHT NOT BE SOON, THAT EVENTUALITY MEANS KOREA SHOULD START SHIFTING TOWARD CHINA NOW.







KOREA FASHIONS ITSELF A"MIDDLE POWER" AND A WEDGE BETWEEN CHINA AND AMERICA



THESE STUDENTS SEEM TO INTERNALIZE THAT ETHOS AND HOPE THAT THIS IS THE ROLE KOREA PLAYS IN THE FUTURE.





THE STUDENTS' OPINIONS RESONATED WITH EACH OTHER THROUGHOUT MOST OF THE INTERVIENS I CONDUCTED. STILL, THERE WERE NUANCES ALONG THE



A PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICIAL AT A TOP KOREAN COMPANY SPOKE WITH ME A-BOUT THESE ISSUES, SHE WAS ADAMANT THAT:



PLUS, THE HISTORY THE TWO COUNTRIES HAVE SHARED SINCE THE KOREAN WAR MAKES IT SO THE TWO CAN NEVER, AND SHOULD NEVER, BE APART.



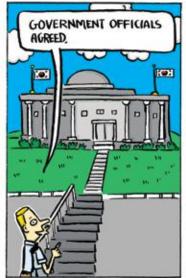
THAT SAID, SHE'S AWARE CHINAIS A
"BIG, FAT" ISSUE THAT WILL ALWAYS
REMAIN, WHETHER IN ITS SUPPORT FOR
NORTH KOREA, ITS DESIRE FOR MORE
REGIONAL CONTROL, OR ITS GROWING
HOLD ON THE KOREAN ECONOMY.



BUT THAT'S WHY AMERICA AND KOREA
NEED EACH OTHER EVEN MORE, SOUTH
KOREA CAN SERVE AS A "BUFFER"
BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES, BUT
THAT WOULD ONLY WORK IF SEOUL
SIDES MORE WITH WASHINGTON
THAN WITH BEIJING.







I MET WITH THREE PARK ADMIN-ISTRATION STAFFERS, WHO COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE EMPHATIC ABOUT STRENGTHENING US-ROK TIES.



THE VALUES WE SHARE BIND OUR TWO COUNTRIES TIGHTLY TO-GETHER, AND WE CANNOT LET THAT GO.



HE WAS VERY PASSIONATE ABOUT THIS.
FROM HIS PERCH INSIDE THE GOVERNMENT, HE COULD SEE THE DAYTO-DAY INTERACTIONS THAT HELPED
MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.



AND HE SAID, "AMERICA'S FRIENDSHIP" IS A GOOD REASON WHY SOUTH KOREA HAS BECOME THE ECONOMIC POWER-HOUSE IT IS TODAY.



HOWEVER, THEY HAD ONE WORD OF WARNING FOR THE NEXT US ADMIN-ISTRATION, WHICH WE NOW KNOW IS HEADED BY TRUMP:



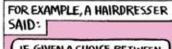
BUT TO REALLY STRENGTHEN TIES WITH KOREA, THE US NEEDS TO STOP PLAYING A TRIANGLE GAME BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN.



THE SOUTH KOREAN-JAPAN RELATIONSHIP IS TENSE, ESPECIALLY DUE TO HISTORICAL ISSUES RELATING TO JAPAN'S OCCUPATION OF THE PENINSULA. STILL, AMERICA TRIESTO GET THEM TO WORK TOGETHER AS A BULWARK AGAINST RAMPANT CHINESE





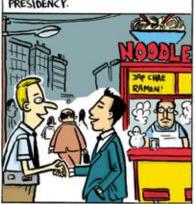


IF GIVEN A CHOICE BETWEEN KOREA AND CHINA, KOREANS 700AF WOULD CHOOSE AMERICA, BUT IN THE FUTURE THAT WILL LIKELY CHANGE.

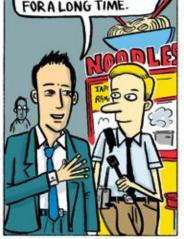




OTHERS FELT THE SAME WAY, IN-CLUDING A STAFFER IN KOREA'S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY-ITS PARLIA-MENT- FROM THE MINJOO PARTY, THE LIBERAL PARTY THAT JUST WON THE PRESIDENCY.



KOREA HAS BEEN VERY FRIENDLY TO THE US FOR A LONG TIME.



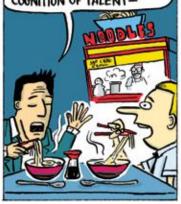
HOWEVER, YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN POLITICS BECAUSE OF STRESSES IN THE ECONOMY.



BECAUSE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IS PERCEIVED TO BE LAGGING INSOUTH KOREA, YOUNG KOREANS WILL DO WHATEVER HELPS THEM GET A JOB, AT THIS POINT, CHINA IS WINNING THE BATTLE, PROVIDING MORE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW MEMBERS OF THE KOREAN WORKFORCE THAN THE US.



KOREA HAS REASONS WHY ITS ECON-OMY DOES NOT PERFORM AT FULL STRENGTH - MONOPOLIZATION, COR-RUPTION, AND OLD PRACTICES THAT STAGNATE INNOVATION AND RE-COGNITION OF TALENT—



FOR THAT REASON IT WILL SEEK IM-MEDIATE HELP, AND AT THIS MOMENT, CHINA IS THE BETTER PARTNER.







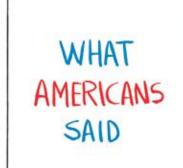
BUT WE KNOW THAT CHINA IS GOING TO MATTER TO US MORE IN THE FUTURE, SO SEOUL SHOULD START TO LEAN IN THAT DIRECTION!













...UNDERSTAND THE CONUNDRUMS FACING SOUTH KOREA RIGHT NOW, BUT BELIEVE KOREANS WILL EVENTUALLY CHOOSE TO BE MORE ALIGNED WITH THE UNITED STATES THAN CHINA.



#### A POLLSTER SAID:

KOREA GETS SO MUCH MORE FROM THE UNITED STATES THAN WHAT THE UNITED STATES GETS IN RETURN, SO KOREA HAS NO CHOICE BUT TO MAKE THE US KOREA'S TOP ALLY AND PARTNER.



KOREA GETS TO SPEND LESS ON DEFENSE WHILE ALSO GETTING ECONOMICHELP. IT'S A DEAL THEY CAN'T PASS UP.



"CHINA MIGHT HAVE THE UPPER HAND ON THE ECONOMIC SIDE, BUT KOREA IS UTTERLY DEPENDENT UPON US SECUR-ITY SUPPORT."



AMERICA COULD DO MORE TO MAKE IT SHOW THAT IT CARES ABOUT KOREA THOUGH.



ONE WAY TO DO THAT WOULD BE TO SPEND AS MUCH TIME WITH KOREA AS IT DOES WITH JAPAN, WHICH HE BELIEVES THE UNITED STATES TREATS AS ITS TOP ALLY IN ASIA.



HE ALSO MENTIONED THAT POLLING HAS SHOWN YOUNG KOREANS STILL LIKE THE UNITED STATES AND DISTRUST CHINA.



THAT HAS THE POSSIBILITY TO CHANGE, THOUGH, IF SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY DOESN'T PICK UP AND DEAL WITH YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE LACK OF MOBILITY.



CHINA COULD STEP OVER THE LINE IN ITS DEALINGS WITH KOREA CHANGING YOUNG KOREANS' MINDS.



BUT DESPITE THE WORKFORCE ISSUES, YOUNG KOREANS FEEL THEY STARTED LIFE BETTER OFF THAN THEIR PARENTS, AND YOUNG KOREANS OFTEN ATTRIBUTE THAT TO THE UNITED STATES.



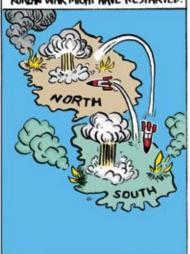




HE REFERRED TO NORTH KOREA'S
THREATS TOWARD SOUTH KOREA. HE BE-LIEVES THE ONLY REASON NORTH KOREA
HASN'T USED ITS MASSIVE ARTILLERY
FORCE ON THE DE-MILITARIZED ZONE
TO HARM SOUTH KOREA YET IS BE-CAUSE OF US SECURITY BACKING.







HE ALSO SUGGESTED THAT THE INSISTENCE ON UNIFICATION IS ACTUALLY AGAINST AMERICA'S TOP INTEREST, WHICH IS STABILITY ON THE PENINSULA.



TRYING TO UNIFY THE COUNTRY AFTER SO MANY YEARS WOULD ACTUALLY MAKE THE REGION LESS STABLE



THE STATUS QUO, WITH A FEW MODIFICATIONS, WOULD BE THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION.



THE ONLY WAY TO STAY ON THAT PATH WOULD BE FOR SEOUL TO COZY UP MORE TO WASHINGTON THAN BEIJING.



A FORMER WHITE HOUSE STAFFER AGREED WITH THOSE SENT-IMENTS, BUT PERHAPS NOT AS GLUMLY.





THE ALTERNATIVES, SHESAID, WOULD BE "UNTHINKABLE!" SHECLAIMS THAT IF KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES NO LONGER PRIORITIZE THEIR RELATIONSHIP, THINGS COULD GET REALLY BADIN THE REGION.



LESS LIKELY, BUT NO LESS
FRIGHTENING, IS THAT THE SITUATION COULD BECOME NUCLEAR:

A YOUNG KOREAN EXPERT SAID THAT KOREA SHOULD PRIORITIZE THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP OVER ANY OTHER, BUT ITS ACTUALLY THE UNITED STATES THAT NEEDS TO DO THE SELLING.



THE RELATIONSHIP "IS NOT AS POP-ULAR IN DC," SHE SAID, SPEAKING AFTER THE ELECTION OF DONALD TRUMP.



NOW THAT THERE IS A LIBERAL GOV-ERNMENT IN KOREA, TRUMP WILL NEED TO SELL STRONGER TIES, SOMETHING MOON MIGHT NOT BE COMPLETELY RECEPTIVE TO AT THE START.



A YOUNG WEST VIRGINIAN I SPOKE TO WHO WAS VISITING WASHINGTON, DO SAID SHE HAD NOT THOUGHT MUCH AROUT THE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOUTH KOREA BUT ASSUMED THAT HAVING TIES WOULD BE GOOD.





#### I ASKED HER IF THE UNITED STATES SHOULD PRIORITIZE THAT RE-LATIONSHIP OVER THE JAPANESE ONE.





### CONCLUSION





THEY WERE AN INSIGHT INTO THE MINDS OF THE PEOPLE WHO, AT THE BALLOT BOX AND ELSEWHERE, WILL HELP DEFINE THE FUTURE OF THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP.



IT WAS ALSO A GOOD SNAPSHOT OF THE CURRENT THINKING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE PACIFIC DUR-ING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN BOTH COUNTRIES.



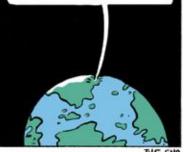
HOWEVER, THIS WAS NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE STUDY BY ANY MEANS, AND IT WAS CERTAINLY A VERY SMALL SAMPLE.



THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT ANY LESS IMPORTANT: THESE ARE THE DEBATES AND DISCUSSIONS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW IN THE HALLS OF POWER, IN SALONS, AND IN LIVING ROOMS IN SOUTH KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES.



THESE DEBATES WILL SET THE COURSE OF THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP AND, THEREFORE, WORLD ORDER. THAT IS WHY THESE CONVERSATIONS NEED TO CONTINUE. THE WORLD'S FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT...



THE END

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