Sparse Feature Coactivation Reveals Composable Semantic Modules in Large Language Models

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Abstract

We identify semantically coherent, context-consistent network components in large language models (LLMs) using coactivation of sparse autoencoder (SAE) features collected from just a handful of prompts. Focusing on country-relation tasks, we show that ablating semantic components for countries and relations changes model outputs in predictable ways, while amplifying these components induces counterfactual responses. Notably, composing relation and country components yields compound counterfactual outputs (Figure 1). We find that, whereas most country components emerge from the very first layer, the more abstract relation components are concentrated in later layers; within relation components themselves, nodes from later layers tend to have a stronger causal impact on model outputs. Overall, these findings suggest a modular organization of knowledge within LLMs and advance methods for efficient, targeted model manipulation.

1 Introduction

Sparse autoencoders (SAEs) have emerged as a powerful tool for extracting interpretable features from large language models (LLMs), but it remains unclear how these features integrate across layers to produce coherent responses. In this work, we uncover modular semantic structures in the form of networks of coactivating SAE features. Compared to Ameisen et al. [1], our approach does not require manual grouping of features. We also provide a more granular, feature-level view of the mechanism identified by Merullo et al. [25]. For a full discussion of related work, see Appendix A.

We focus our analyses on Gemma 2 2B [34], with additional results for Gemma 2 9B in Appendix D. For each prompt, we collect activations from pre-trained SAEs [21, 3] and select the set of features that appear in the top-5 activations at any token position for each layer. Second, we construct a directed graph where nodes are the selected features and an edge connects features in adjacent layers if their activation patterns have a Pearson correlation over 0.9. Third, to filter out overly generic features, we prune this graph by removing any feature with an activation density greater than 0.01 according to Neuronpedia [22]. Finally, we identify the resulting weakly connected components using a standard BFS algorithm [15] and validate their causal role by ablating or amplifying their activations [27] and measuring the model's output distribution shift.

2 Experimental Results

We focused on country-capital, country-currency, and country-language tasks for China, France, Germany, Japan, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. To collect model activations for each country-capital pair, we used the following prompt template with in-context examples: "*The capital city of Peru is Lima. The capital city of South Korea is Seoul. The*

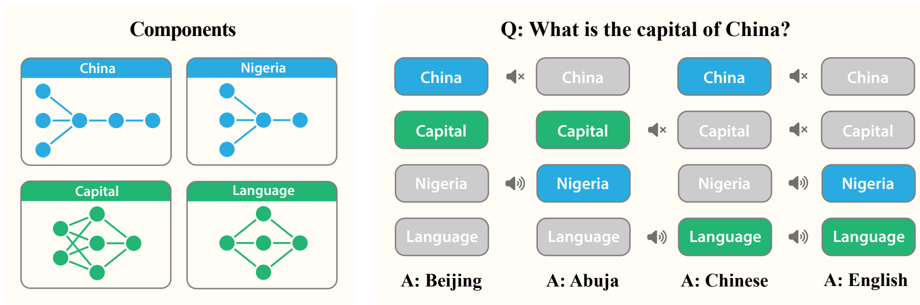

Figure 1: Selective component ablation and amplification steers model toward counterfactual outputs.

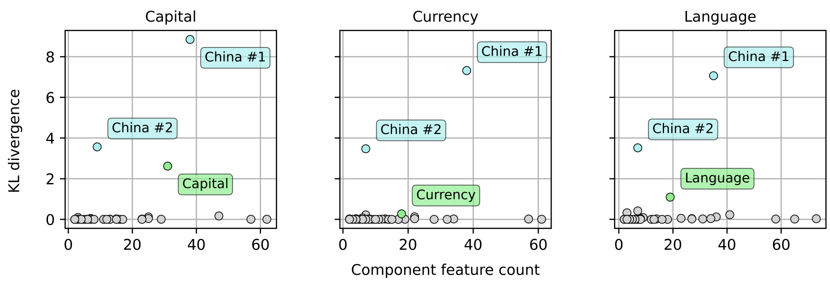

Figure 2: Component feature count (x-axis) vs. causal effect (KL divergence) when ablated (y-axis).

capital city of Saudi Arabia is Riyadh. The capital city of {*country*} *is*". Similar templates were used for country-currency and country-language pairs.

2.1 Component Identification

For each country-relation pair, we obtained around 70 connected components using the methods outlined in Section 1. Typically, two to three of the extracted components exert a markedly higher causal effect on the model output than the others (Figure 2).

Semantic coherence. To evaluate the roles of these top components, we began by inspecting their associated feature descriptions from Neuronpedia. In most cases, the features within a given component had thematically coherent descriptions, often referring to a common country or relation (Appendix C). However, there are exceptions—for instance, none of the high-impact components obtained from Spain-related prompts explicitly mention Spain in their feature descriptions. Given that feature descriptions are not always reliable, we performed component ablations and observed the resulting changes in the model's top predicted tokens. Table 1 presents results from ablation experiments using components obtained from China and Nigeria-related prompts. Promisingly, when country components were ablated, the model's top predicted tokens shifted predictably to the capitals, currencies, or languages of other countries. When relation components were ablated, the model assigned higher probabilities to country names.

Capital						**Currency**						**Language**					
Original		*Ctry. Abl.*		*Rel. Abl.*		*Original*		*Ctry. Abl.*		*Rel. Abl.*		*Original*		*Ctry. Abl.*		*Rel. Abl.*	
Beijing	97.	Madrid	39.	the	12.	Yuan	80.	Euro	64.	Yuan	59.	Mandarin	59.	Spanish	49.	Chinese	24.
Be	.38	Warsaw	10.	China	6.7	Ren	14.	Lira	20.	Ren	14.	Chinese	37.	English	22.	China	18.
Peking	.35	Rome	9.5	Beijing	6.4	RMB	1.8	Krone	3.1	Yen	1.9	English	.69	French	6.7	Mandarin	11.
Shanghai	.23	Paris	6.1	Shanghai	5.0	Yen	.98	Franc	2.4	P	1.7	also	.43	German	4.0	also	3.5
Xi	.11	Berlin	5.0	a	2.7	yuan	.53	Peso	1.2	Ba	1.5	Put	.22	Italian	2.7	a	2.9
Abuja	85.	New	7.7	Lagos	17.	Naira	93.	Franc	16.	Naira	62.	English	72.	English	50.	Nigeria	40.
Lagos	11.	Islamabad	7.3	the	12.	N	2.9	Euro	9.1	Dollar	6.0	Ha	11.	French	31.	English	14.
...	.38	Kathmandu	6.0	Nigeria	7.1	Nai	2.5	D	7.4	Niger	4.3	Yoruba	4.7	Spanish	2.1	Nigerian	9.8
Nigeria	.29	Delhi	5.7	called	5.1	naira	.36	Pound	5.1	Currency	2.4	Igbo	2.4	Arabic	2.0	...	2.9
...	.27	Tehran	4.9	Abuja	3.4	K	.23	Krone	4.8	Nai	1.4	Nigerian	1.6	Dutch	1.1	also	2.3

Table 1: Top five output tokens and their likelihoods for China (top) and Nigeria (bottom) across all three relations, before and after ablating the relevant country or relation component.

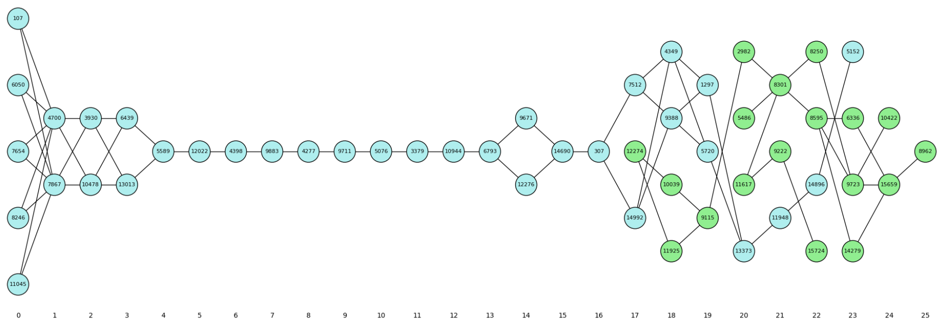

Figure 3: China (blue) and language (green) components.

Capital, China						Currency, China						Language, China					
·, Nigeria		*Currency, ·*		*Language, ·*		*·, Nigeria*		*Capital, ·*		*Language, ·*		*·, Nigeria*		*Capital, ·*		*Currency, ·*	
_Abuja	87.	_Yuan	15.	_Mandarin	32.	_Naira	75.	_Beijing	98.	_Chinese	.35	_English	71.	_Beijing	96.	_Yuan	15.
_Nigeria	4.6	_yuan	12.	_Chinese	27.	_naira	8.3	_Be	.75	_Mandarin	.33	*_Yoruba*	5.6	_Be	1.5	_Ren	10.
_Lagos	3.9	_RMB	11.	*_English*	25.	_Nai	3.7	_BE	.34	*_English*	.28	*_Ha*	4.8	*_Peking*	.83	_RMB	6.8
_-	.58	_Ren	5.6	*_Spanish*	2.2	*_Nigeria*	3.3	*_Peking*	.27	*_Simplified*	.82	*_Nigeria*	4.4	Beijing	.42	_yuan	6.3
_	.57	*_China*	5.4	_mandarin	2.1	*_Nigerian*	2.4	Beijing	.25	*_Spanish*	.79	*_Igbo*	3.4	_BE	.30	*_The*	5.3

Table 2: Top five output tokens and likelihoods for prompts about China after ablating an in-prompt component and amplifying a target country or relation.

Context consistency. We found that country and relation components are remarkably consistent across different contexts. Therefore, in subsequent experiments, we define each country component as the intersection of all the components for that country across relations; similarly, each relation component is defined as the intersection of all the components for that relation across countries. Figure 3 shows the resulting China and Language components.

2.2 Component Steering

Having identified distinct graph components for each country and relation, we next investigate whether these components can be used to steer model outputs individually and in combination. To test whether components generalize across different contexts, we applied a test prompt template different from the one used to collect the initial activations: *"Q: What is the* {*capital city of / currency of / main language in*} {*country*}*? Answer directly (two words max). A:"*.

Country steering. By ablating an *in-prompt country* component and amplifying a *target country* component, we successfully directed the LLM to respond to questions about the capital, currency, and language of the in-prompt country with *counterfactual answers*, i.e., the capital, currency, or language for the target country, which is not actually queried in the prompt. As shown in Table 2, when we ablated the China component and amplified the Nigeria component, the model consistently responded with the desired counterfactual answers "*Abuja*", "*Naira*", and "*English*" for capital, currency, and language questions, respectively—disregarding the prompt's reference to China. Overall, country steering successfully produced the desired counterfactual answers 96% of the time (Table 3). This confirms that our identified country components encode country-specific information that causally determines model outputs.

Relation steering. Similarly, by ablating an *in-prompt relation* while amplifying a *target relation*, we successfully directed the model to respond to queries about the *in-prompt relation* as though they concerned the *target relation*. As shown in Table 2, with the capital component ablated, the model answered a question about China's capital with "*Yuan*" and "*Mandarin*" when currency and language components were respectively amplified. We observed similar results for currency and language prompts. The average success rate for relation steering is 92% (Table 3).

CN	FR	DE	JP	NG	PL	RU	ES	UK	US	Avg.	Cap.	Curr.	Lang.	Avg.
1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.78	1.00	0.78	1.00	1.00	0.96	0.95	0.90	0.90	0.92

Table 3: Steering success rates for each target country and relation.

Capital, China				Currency, China				Language, China			
Currency, Nigeria		*Language, Nigeria*		*Capital, Nigeria*		*Language, Nigeria*		*Capital, Nigeria*		*Currency, Nigeria*	
_Naira	34.	_English	71.	_Abuja	70.	_English	93.	_Abuja	49.	_Naira	40.
_Nigeria	28.	*_French*	5.1	*_Lagos*	26.	*_French*	1.7	*_Lagos*	46.	*_Nigeria*	18.
_naira	13.	*_Yoruba*	4.1	_	2.3	*_Yoruba*	1.5	_	1.7	*_Dollar*	6.2
_N	4.1	*_Spanish*	3.8	*_Nigeria*	.41	*_Spanish*	1.1	*_Nigeria*	.78	_naira	4.7
_	3.2	*_Igbo*	3.0	_...	.30	*_Igbo*	.55	_...	.36	_	3.7

Table 4: Top five output tokens and likelihoods for prompts about China after ablating both in-prompt components (row 1) and amplifying a target country-relation pair (row 2).

Ctry. / Rel.	CN	FR	DE	JP	NG	PL	RU	ES	UK	US	Avg.
Capital	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Currency	1.00	0.94	1.00	0.72	0.61	0.50	0.11	0.94	1.00	1.00	0.78
Language	0.50	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.78	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.93
Average	0.83	0.98	1.00	0.91	0.87	0.76	0.70	0.98	1.00	1.00	0.90

Table 5: Composite steering success rates for each target country-relation pair.

Composite steering. We conducted composite steering experiments where both country and relation components were manipulated at once. By ablating both the *in-prompt country* and *in-prompt relation* components while amplifying the *target country* and *target relation* components, it is indeed possible to steer the model to ignore both the *in-prompt country* and *in-prompt relation* and answer about a different country-relation pair. Table 4 provides specific examples of composite steering success. As shown in the first column, when we ablated both the China and capital components while amplifying the Nigeria and currency components, the model correctly answered "*Naira*" despite being asked about China's capital. The average steering success rate for composite steering is 90% (Table 5).

2.3 Component Organization

Having established the causal role and composability of country and relation components, we next analyze their distribution across network layers and the relative importance of individual nodes within these components. To quantify the causal importance of an individual country node, we compute the average post-ablation KL divergence from the original output distribution across all relations. For a relation node, we compute the same average across all countries. Country and relation components show distinct distribution patterns across model layers. Eight out of the ten country components tested begin in the first layer of the network; some (e.g., China) span nearly all layers, while others (e.g., Nigeria) concentrate in early to middle layers. In contrast, all three relation components appear only in later layers of the network (Figure 4). This suggests that representations of concrete entities are established earlier in processing, while those of abstract relational concepts emerge later. Not only do all three relation components concentrate in later layers, but we find that, even within each relation component, nodes from later layers tend to have a stronger causal impact on model outputs. This is not the case for country nodes, which exhibit variable relationships between layer depth and KL divergence ranging from positive to negative.

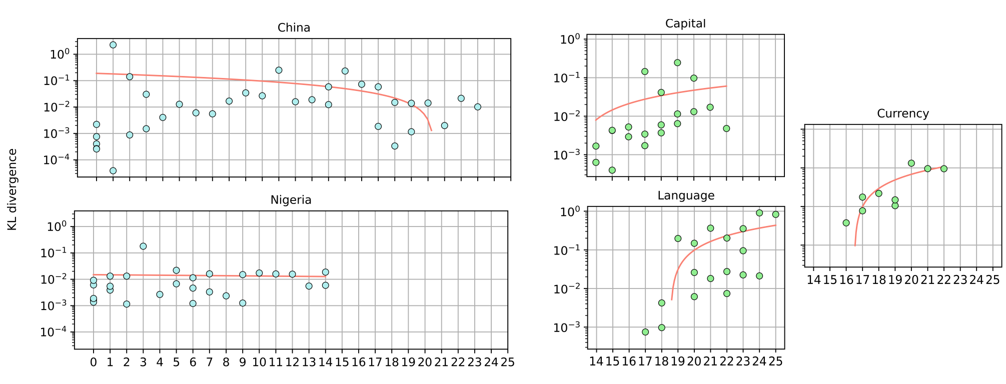

Figure 4: Node-wise KL divergence between pre- and post-ablation output token distributions.

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A Related Work

Mechanistic interpretability aims to reverse-engineer neural networks into human-interpretable algorithms. Central to this field is the hypothesis that large networks can be understood as compositions of subnetworks, known as circuits, that perform specific functions [11, 28, 33]. Early efforts involved manual identification of circuits for specific tasks such as numerical comparison [16] and indirect object recognition [35]. Work on in-context learning revealed specialized mechanisms like induction heads, which detect repeated subsequences and predict their completion [29]. To improve scalability, automated circuit discovery methods were developed, including path patching [14], ACDC [6], CD-T [18], and edge pruning [2]. However, these approaches are often computationally expensive and can yield circuits that are difficult for humans to interpret.

The theory of superposition proposes that networks represent more features than dimensions by encoding sparse features across polysemantic neurons [10]. Dictionary learning techniques such as SAEs promise greater interpretability by extracting monosemantic features from polysemantic neurons [5, 19]. However, standard SAEs face challenges such as inconsistent feature quality, poor reconstruction, and weak functional alignment—issues that recent work has sought to address through architectural and training improvements [4, 31, 32]. SAEs have also allowed circuit discovery to operate on interpretable features instead of neurons [23]. Circuit tracing efforts by Anthropic [1] utilized transcoders [9], an alternative approach for extracting human-interpretable features from LLMs. Despite these advances, high computational costs remain a significant barrier. More recently, coactivation patterns have been explored for understanding SAE feature organization. Li et al. [20] analyzed the geometry of SAE features, finding spatial clustering of related concepts. Building on this approach, we construct directed graphs based on feature coactivation and introduce node pruning based on activation density. This allows us to discover semantically coherent, context-consistent connected components that can influence model outputs individually or in combination. Our approach offers a computationally efficient framework for analyzing and controlling LLM behavior without exhaustive circuit tracing.

Factual knowledge is believed to reside in the feedforward layers of transformer-based LLMs. Geva et al. [13] characterized these layers as key-value memories mapping textual patterns to vocabulary distributions. Dai et al. [7] identified "knowledge neurons" whose activations correlate with specific facts. These insights have informed approaches for editing factual knowledge stored in LLMs [8, 26, 24]. Geva et al. [12] described the recall of factual associations as a three-step process involving subject enrichment, relation propagation, and attribute extraction. Hernandez et al. [17] demonstrated that relation decoding in transformers can be approximated by simple linear transformations. Merullo et al. [25] showed that LLMs implement Word2Vec-style vector arithmetic to solve some relational tasks. Recent work on "knowledge circuits" has begun tracing causal pathways underlying factual recall [36, 30]. Leveraging SAEs, our method offers a more human-interpretable analysis of LLMs' knowledge organization by identifying emergent connected components that correspond to task-related concepts.

B Model and Hyperparameter Selection

Our choice of LLMs was constrained to those with pretrained SAEs available via Neuronpedia. We did not use smaller models like GPT-2, as they demonstrated a weaker grasp of the factual concepts under investigation (e.g., confusing Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, with its capital) and an inability to follow in-context instructions to shorten their answers.

For individual country and relation steering, we selected steering strengths α_c, α_r from $\{k \cdot 0.05 : k \in \mathbb{Z}\} \cap (0, 1]$ that achieved the highest respective success rates. For composite steering, we selected the (α'_c, α'_r) pair from $\{\alpha_c - 0.05, \alpha_c, \alpha_c + 0.05\} \times \{\alpha_r - 0.05, \alpha_r, \alpha_r + 0.05\}$ that achieved the highest success rate. This procedure yielded parameters $\alpha_c = 0.1$, $\alpha_r = 0.45$, $\alpha'_c = 0.15$, and $\alpha'_r = 0.45$.

C Component Feature Visualizations

Figure 5 shows word clouds for LLM-generated descriptions [22] of SAE features within the China, capital, currency, and language components.

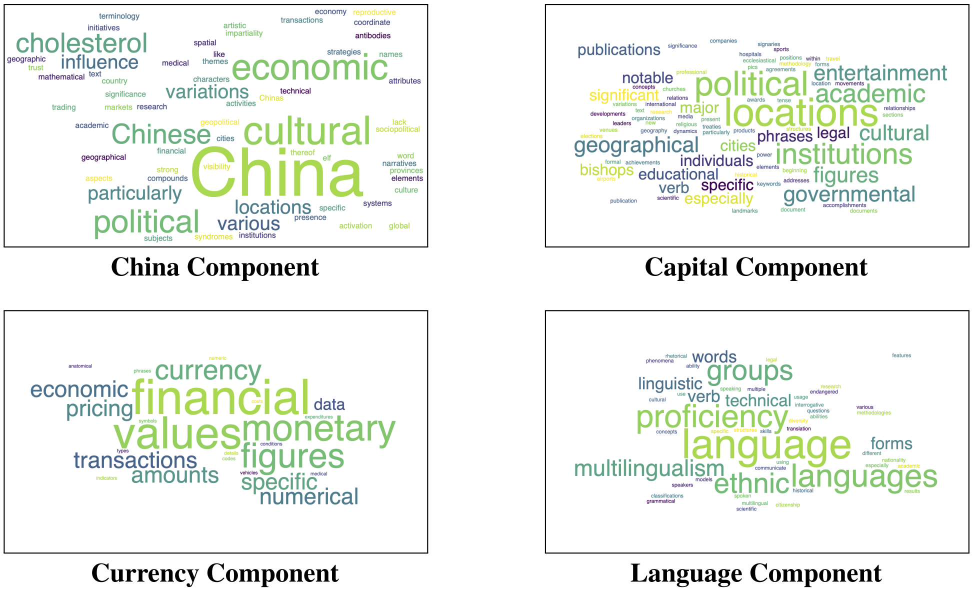

Figure 5: Component word clouds.

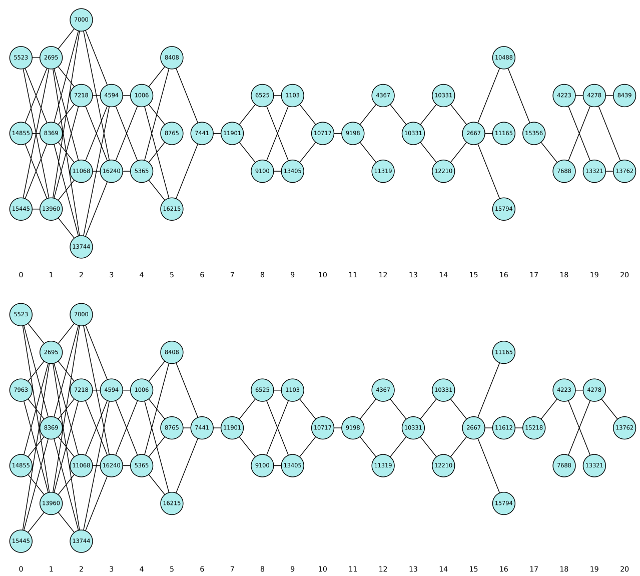

Figure 6: China components extracted from capital and currency prompts (Gemma 2 9B).

D Gemma 2 9B Results

We replicated all experiments using Gemma 2 9B. Results closely mirrored those observed with Gemma 2 2B. The model showed context consistency, with similar country components across relations (Figure 6) and similar relation components across countries (Figure 7). High success rates were achieved for country (93%), relation (97%), and composite (92%) steering (see Tables 6–7).

CN	FR	DE	JP	NG	PL	RU	ES	UK	US	Avg.	Cap.	Curr.	Lang.	Avg.
1.00	0.78	0.85	1.00	0.89	0.81	1.00	0.96	1.00	0.96	0.93	0.90	1.00	1.00	0.97

Table 6: Steering success rates for each target country and relation (Gemma 2 9B).

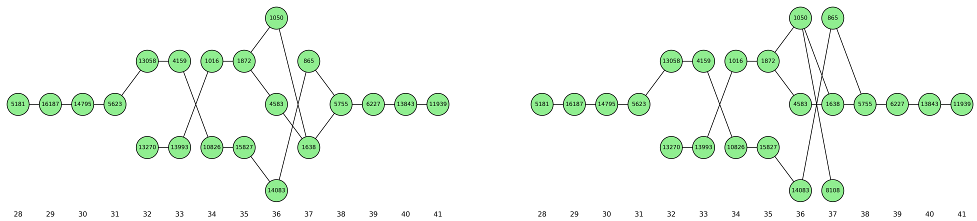

Figure 7: Language components extracted from China and Nigeria prompts (Gemma 2 9B).

Ctry. / Rel.	CN	FR	DE	JP	NG	PL	RU	ES	UK	US	Avg.
Capital	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Currency	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.72	1.00	0.50	0.11	0.94	1.00	1.00	0.83
Language	0.50	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.78	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.93
Average	0.83	1.00	1.00	0.91	1.00	0.76	0.70	0.98	1.00	1.00	0.92

Table 7: Composite steering success rates for each target country-relation pair (Gemma 2 9B).

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