

Out of Area, but in the Game: NATO as an Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actor

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Abstract

As an alliance without a formal Indo-Pacific mandate, NATO's engagement in this region prompts questions about its strategic orientation. This article assesses NATO as an unconventional actor along three dimensions: a broadened threat calculus (China as a systemic challenge), functional expansion into non-traditional domains (cyber, information resilience, defence-industrial coordination), and strategic alignment with the IP4 (Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand). Using the Forum's five variables – trade, political-normative interests, security, external pressures, and posture – the article shows that NATO's posture is modular, partnership-driven, and politically calibrated. Empirically, it finds that the Alliance operates as an external platform for coordination – delivering technical cooperation on cyber and supply-chain resilience and promoting interoperability – while avoiding treaty commitments or forward deployments. The analysis concludes that NATO's institutional capacities reshape trans-regional security practices but remain bounded by legal limits, member divergence, and partner sensitivities.

Keywords

NATO, China, Indo-Pacific Four, norms, security, unconventional actors

Introduction

Amid an increasingly volatile international system, marked by strategic competition, technological rivalry, and shifting power balances, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a pivotal arena where regional and extra-regional actors contend to shape the evolving

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architecture of global security. Notwithstanding the growing plurality of actors involved, NATO's expanding engagement in the Indo-Pacific is unconventional both spatially and functionally. The Alliance's regional interactions do not reflect territorial extension or treaty expansion, but they do represent a deliberate institutional reorientation: NATO is extending some of the governance capacities developed for the Euro-Atlantic into a set of modular, outward-facing instruments. Since the 2022 Strategic Concept reframed China as a systemic challenge to Alliance interests, NATO has intensified high-level dialogue with the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4 – Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand), launched “flagship” cooperative projects, and promoted initiatives intended to strengthen defence-industrial resilience. These developments matter not because they replicate conventional alliance behaviour in the Indo-Pacific, but because they reconfigure the Alliance's tools – standard-setting, industrial coordination, cyber and information-resilience cooperation – and thus exert material effects on regional security practices and capacities.

Building on the introductory article to this Forum,¹ this article treats NATO as an “unconventional Indo-Pacific actor” and addresses two interrelated questions. First, in what specific ways is NATO an unconventional Indo-Pacific actor? Second, what are the political and material consequences of that unconventionality for both alliance politics and regional governance? To answer these questions the article employs the five-parameter analytical framework used throughout this Forum: (i) trade ties; (ii) political-normative interests; (iii) security interests; (iv) external pressures; and (v) posture and trends. This framework permits systematic comparison across domains in which NATO's capacities are both relevant and constrained. The claim advanced here is that NATO's Indo-Pacific engagement shows the alliance functioning as an external platform for coordination between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific partners rather than as a deeply embedded security actor in the Indo-Pacific. Empirically, its engagement concentrates on non-territorial and often non-kinetic domains such as cyber security and counter-disinformation, as well as defence-industrial cooperation and interoperability. Its delivered through security cooperation, expert groups and bilateral, minilateral, and/or plurilateral exercises rather than through NATO-led deployments. Analytically, this mode of engagement is best understood as institutional adaptation: the Alliance exports procedural and technical practices that harmonise partner states' threat perceptions and operational standards without extending Article 5 guarantees. The significance of this distinction lies in the precise mechanisms through which influence is exercised – namely, how NATO contributes to harmonisation of threat perceptions where member-state agreement exists (narrative brokerage), brings members and IP4 partners into structured dialogue (convening authority), socialises common interoperability standards (standard-setting), and clusters national efforts into joint political and practical outputs (capability aggregation) – rather than in traditional metrics of basing or force projection.²

At the same time, NATO's role as an unconventional Indo-Pacific actor, operating outside treaty-bound territorial defence through coordination, signalling, and standard-setting, is structurally bounded. The alliance's legal architecture, the requirement for consensus among member states, heterogeneous national interests, and regional political sensitivities constrain the depth and speed of this non-traditional institutionalisation. These structural limits force NATO to select low-risk, high-utility domains for

extra-territorial cooperation, favouring modular and reversible commitments.³ Whether this type of “platformised” engagement evolves into more durable structural linkages will depend on member states’ industrial investments, partners’ willingness to internalise NATO-derived standards, and broader trajectories of systemic competition.

Methodologically, this article combines analysis of policy proclamations and summit communiqués with a focused empirical account of practice – flagship initiatives, IP4 partnership exchanges, and observable patterns of security cooperation. The following sections first situate NATO within the unconventionality frame and then interpret it under the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, prior to assessing its Indo-Pacific posture against the Forum’s five parameters (trade ties, political-normative interests, security interests, external pressures, posture and trends) and presenting brief vignettes of NATO–IP4 interactions. The concluding sections evaluate the implications and limits of NATO’s engagement. Empirically, NATO produces tangible gains in non-territorial domains by institutionalising standards and catalysing partner projects. Those gains enhance interoperability and reduce transaction costs, but they do not substitute for treaty guarantees and carry political risks. The article argues that NATO’s Indo-Pacific role is therefore likely to deepen technically rather than expand territorially, contingent on continued investment, partner uptake, and the wider strategic environment.

Indo-Pacific Unconventionality as an Analytical Frame

Indo-Pacific unconventionality can be ascribed to actors whose impact on regional developments and flows stems not from territorially anchored force or formal regional status, but from institutional position, functional specialisation, and/or atypical mandates.⁴ Such actors do not merely stand outside a theatre; they influence outcomes through organisational practices, operational repertoires, and policy linkages without displaying conventional indicators. Defining unconventionality in this way redirects analysis from the geography of power to its modalities: how authority is exercised through procedures, institutional relationships, and specialised capacities rather than through direct territorial control.

NATO exemplifies the category of Indo-Pacific unconventionality. Traditionally a Euro-Atlantic collective-defence organisation, over the past decade it has reframed parts of its agenda to address trans-regional risks and partnerships without extending treaty obligations. The 2022 Strategic Concept’s asserted that China’s “ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values.”⁵ The Washington Summit in 2024 explicitly linked Beijing to Russia’s war, while the Hague 2025s omission of China underscores the persistent limits of consensus.⁶

Two features characterise NATO’s doctrinal reorientation. First, substantive reframing: leaders have not redefined the Alliance’s territorial mandate but have reconceptualised certain trans-regional phenomena as impinging on Alliance interests – technological dependency, information operations, and strategic alignments that have spillover effects. Second, linguistic caution: NATO has preferred the term “challenge” over explicitly adversarial labels, a deliberate lexical choice that broadens the Alliance’s analytic aperture while leaving space for engagement. These choices accommodate divergent national positions and facilitate an institutional posture that emphasises cooperation

with like-minded partners without claiming treaty obligations. This analysis adopts a neoliberal institutionalist lens, focusing on how institutions reduce transaction costs and create incentives for cooperation among states with heterogeneous preferences. From that theoretical perspective, NATO's engagement functions as an institutional mechanism that aligns expectations and fosters cooperation between NATO and its IP4 partners in a way that cuts transaction costs but without necessitating formal treaty expansion.⁷

Consistent with the neoliberal institutionalist lens, NATO's posture emerges from intergovernmental bargaining as much as from Secretariat advocacy. Official NATO positions require unanimity among thirty-two governments, each with distinct threat perceptions and external ties. Member-state "campfires" have therefore shaped both tempo and content. The United States has been a principal driver, at least until recently, of conceptual linkage between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security and of embedding Indo-Pacific partners into NATO working structures.⁸ Conversely, Europe's approach to the region is more fragmented, albeit intensifying.⁹

In sum, NATO's growing engagement with the Indo-Pacific is best read as institutional adaptation within existing legal and political constraints. The Alliance has broadened its analytic frame to treat some Indo-Pacific dynamics as relevant to Euro-Atlantic security and has operationalised that frame through partnership-oriented, project-based initiatives. This development exemplifies unconventional Indo-Pacific engagement: NATO's self-understanding has evolved to encompass trans-regional risk management, yet it retains its Euro-Atlantic legal and operational core and relies on negotiated, politically manageable forms of external interaction.

Assessment Across the Five Parameters

This section systematically evaluates NATO's Indo-Pacific engagement using the Forum's five analytical parameters. This analysis differentiates between ad-hoc occurrences and institutionalised practices by testing each parameter against consistent empirical benchmarks. For each parameter, we evaluate where NATO's institutional capacities are consequential, how they are operationalised across cases, and where structural constraints persist.

Trade Ties

While NATO does not conduct trade policy, industrial interdependence is a constitutive factor in the Alliance's current engagement with the Indo-Pacific. This represents a new regional configuration within an existing partnership model rather than a sudden institutional break. Two empirically distinct logics explain this linkage. The first is vulnerability management: Euro-Atlantic defence planning depends on inputs – semiconductors, specialised electronics, rare-earth minerals, naval components, and dual-use technologies – that are concentrated in Indo-Pacific production networks. NATO policymakers have articulated concern that shortages or coercive export restrictions would degrade sustainment and surge capacity. The Alliance's Defence Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge and subsequent defence production action planning (2024–2025) translate that concern into institutional practice: convenings of defence procurement officials,

outreach to industry associations, and pilot arrangements to harmonise requirements and identify co-production opportunities with IP4 counterparts.¹⁰ Although these initiatives are not trade instruments in themselves, they are institutional mechanisms designed to shape industrial behaviour and reduce single-source dependencies. The second logic is coordination of member-state economic statecraft. NATO's value here is convening and harmonisation: it provides a forum where allies can synchronise threat assessments that inform national economic measures (export controls, investment screening, stockpiling). The Alliance's framing of "supply-chain security" as a security domain since 2022 has made industrial policy an explicit subject of NATO-IP4 cooperation.¹¹ Practically, this produces dialogues on secure procurement standards and incentives for pooled surge capacity rather than conventional treaty-level trade integration. The empirical consequence is indirect but material: by harmonising procurement expectations and creating technical interoperability in logistics and sustainment, NATO reduces systemic risk that would otherwise amplify operational vulnerability in a prolonged crisis.

Political-normative Interests

NATO's normative outreach to the Indo-Pacific combines capacity building and rhetorical harmonisation. Since the adoption of 2022 Strategic Concept, the Alliance has operationalised normative work in concrete programmes: counter-disinformation flagship projects, strategic-communications exchanges, and resilience training aimed at protecting democratic processes and critical infrastructure.¹² These activities take the form of cross-staff secondments, joint exercises on information resilience, and shared attribution methodologies developed in NATO working groups and translated into partner workshops (notably with Japan and Australia). Normative engagement is both instrumental and constitutive. Instrumentally, it supplies partner governments with technical methodologies (attribution protocols, monitoring tools) that improve detection and mitigation of malign influence. Constitutively, it creates a shared vocabulary that makes joint action feasible and lowers coordination costs.¹³ At the same time, the normative register is politically sensitive: several Indo-Pacific states – and some NATO members – prefer operational cooperation to institutional rhetoric, and worry that overt value framing will harden external responses or be read domestically as alignment with a Western bloc.¹⁴ NATO's response – tailored, project-level cooperation rather than universal normative prescriptions – reflects a deliberate attempt to match the specific political and legal constraints of individual partner states.

Security Interests

NATO's declared core task – collective defence of members – remains territorially focused. However, strategic documents and summit communiqués since 2019 have linked Euro-Atlantic security to trans-regional developments. The 2022 Strategic Concept and the 2024 Washington Summit rhetoric explicitly situate cyber threats, technology transfer, and the Sino-Russian cooperation as having trans-regional consequences.¹⁵ Meanwhile, NATO's security engagement and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific concentrate on non-territorial domains: cyber-defence cooperation, information-space

resilience, maritime situational-awareness exchanges, interoperability work with partner navies, and defence-technology dialogues. These are delivered through partner-centred exercises, expert groups, and flagship projects. In short, there is no standing NATO force posture in the Indo-Pacific and no Article-5 extension to IP4 partners.¹⁶ This allows NATO to mobilise technical expertise and interoperability benefits rapidly and with low political cost, while avoiding legal entanglement and security entrapment. However, it also imposes a systemic cap on utility in high-intensity contingencies. Without the hard baselines of treaty guarantees or forward-deployed assets, NATO consistently falls short of the threshold required to act as a regional deterrent. The evidence therefore demonstrates that the alliance functions strictly as a governance platform for capability convergence rather than as a guarantor of regional territorial defence.

External Pressures

NATO's Indo-Pacific course is shaped by a plurality of external drivers and restraints.¹⁷ The United States has been a prominent driver of conceptual integration between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, using summit diplomacy to embed IP4 partners in NATO working groups. Still, serious doubts linger over the US' current desire to maintain this strategic nexus.¹⁸ Conversely, two of Europe's "Big Four" countries – France's insistence on strategic autonomy, Germany's cautious posture – and the Eastern European insistence on prioritising the Alliance's eastern flank constitute internal brakes. Regional variables add further constraints: Indo-Pacific states differ in appetite for *formal* alignment, given their geographical proximity and economic exposure to China, and concerns about escalation. These pressures explain NATO's modular, reversible commitments and low-profile projectisation precisely because such formats are politically tolerable across divergent member political camps and across partners with varying degrees of ambivalence towards explicit Western bloc alignment. The result is iterative experimentation (pilot projects, selective technical cooperation) rather than actual expansion of the Alliance's remit.

Posture and Trends

Accordingly, NATO's current posture can be characterised as institutional normalisation through projectisation.¹⁹ Trend-wise, three tendencies are discernible. First, functional deepening: iterative investment in cyber and industrial resilience that builds cumulative technical capacity. Second, "platformisation": institutional formats that privilege modular projects and working groups – in line with the contemporary predominance of mini-laterals – over permanent structural commitments. Third, calibrated politicisation: the Alliance communicates normative and security concerns but calibrates language and scope to preserve member consensus and to manage partner sensitivities. Taken together, these tendencies point to slow but durable institutionalisation of NATO's external platform role. The Alliance is building routinised channels for technical and industrial cooperation that incrementally alter partners' operational standards and procurement logics. Yet these institutional gains coexist with hard political ceilings: member consensus requirements, domestic budgetary constraints, and regional geopolitical sensitivities

mean that NATO's Indo-Pacific role is likely to expand *in depth* (technical and industrial linkages) rather than *in form* (treaty commitments or force projection).

Engagement in Action: NATO and the IP4

The following vignettes of NATO's engagement with the IP4 demonstrate several characteristics of unconventional Indo-Pacific security engagement. First, their cooperation is chiefly concentrated in non-territorial domains such as cyber, information resilience, and industrial coordination. Second, IP4 partners seek technical knowledge, interoperable standards, and access to pooled expertise while avoiding treaty-style commitments. Third, the IP4 and the Alliance indirectly cooperate through joint exercises and bi/minilateral tactical initiatives which increasingly involve Europe's NATO members in the Indo-Pacific. Together, these dynamics indicate that NATO functions as a technical and procedural platform rather than as a conventional security guarantor in the Indo-Pacific.²⁰ These partner behaviours set the parameters for the Alliance's remit: cooperation deepens where technical utility and political tolerability converge.

Australia

Australia's engagement is driven by industrial and operational considerations. Canberra's defence planners prioritise supply-chain resilience and logistical interoperability as central to readiness for high-intensity contingencies. Interaction with NATO has therefore focused on defence-industrial dialogues, pilot co-production initiatives, and exchanges on logistics and munitions planning, while ongoing discussions may involve future collaboration to tackle hybrid threats in the region.²¹ Australian industry representatives participate in NATO convenings and technical forums, while defence procurement authorities have worked to coordinate on secure procurement standards and stockpile management. Australia's industrial capacity and its proximate stake in regional security make it both a contributor to and beneficiary of NATO's platform for industrial coordination, illustrating how a middle power can leverage the Alliance's convening power to align procurement strategies with like-minded partners.

Japan

Japan's cooperation with NATO concentrates on information operations, cyber security, and defence-industrial linkages. Practically, this has translated into technical exchanges on strategic communications, personnel secondments for interoperability work, and participation in joint workshops that adapt NATO attribution and response methodologies to the information environment.²² Tokyo's policy communities view these exchanges as instruments for institutional learning: NATO-derived analytical frameworks and standards have been incorporated into Japanese practice and referenced in joint declarations and memoranda of understanding.²³ These adoptions lower coordination costs and establish a common epistemic basis for detecting and attributing hostile information campaigns across Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific settings.

Republic of Korea

Seoul's approach to NATO is deliberately calibrated. The Republic of Korea engages principally in cyber-defence and emerging-technology cooperation, eschewing steps that would imply reciprocal security guarantees. Observable cooperation includes joint cyber exercises, staff exchanges focused on resilience, and research partnerships between Korean institutions and NATO working groups on areas such as AI and secure telecommunications.²⁴ While Seoul's Indo-Pacific approach is now clearly more proactive, its selective interaction with NATO still reflects domestic political constraints and a hedging strategy: technical collaboration delivers capability improvements while preserving strategic flexibility and avoiding formal entanglement.

New Zealand

New Zealand participates in NATO forums on information resilience and civil-military preparedness and contributes expertise in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, but has as of late signalled it would like to deepen defence-industrial ties to Europe.²⁵ Wellington's engagement thus increasingly reflects a strategic effort to translate its normative alignment with NATO into tangible security and industrial partnerships. The deepening of ties – underscored by Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's participation in the 2025 Hague Summit as the only head of government from the IP4 – illustrates how New Zealand wants to expand dual-use trade, research collaboration, and defence-industrial cooperation with European partners.

Comparative Observations and Implications

At root, NATO's activity in the region is institutional translation rather than geographic transposition: the Alliance exports procedural capacities rather than a territorially anchored deterrent. That mode of influence rests on three mutually reinforcing mechanisms identified earlier: convening and standard-setting, capability aggregation through coordinated industrial policy, and narrative brokerage that aligns threat perceptions. Together these mechanisms generate alignment among like-minded partners without creating treaty obligations; they are the vectors through which an unconventional Indo-Pacific actor acquires practical effect.

This configuration yields distinct insights that are directly relevant to both the Forum's and the article's analytical framework. *Economically*, NATO's institutional activity lowers transaction costs in defence production by harmonising procurement norms, promoting joint stockpiling, and facilitating technical exchange. *Politically*, it produces an incremental institutionalisation: routinised project formats and working groups that create durable pathways for technical cooperation while preserving partner autonomy. *Strategically*, however, the absence of Article-5 commitments in the Indo-Pacific means NATO cannot credibly deter state actors in theatre; its value is greatest where technical convergence and procedural alignment matter most. *Pressure-wise*, NATO is not immune to exogenous or endogenous tensions, which restrict scope and encourage low-risk, reversible projects rather than expansive commitments. In terms of *posture and trends*,

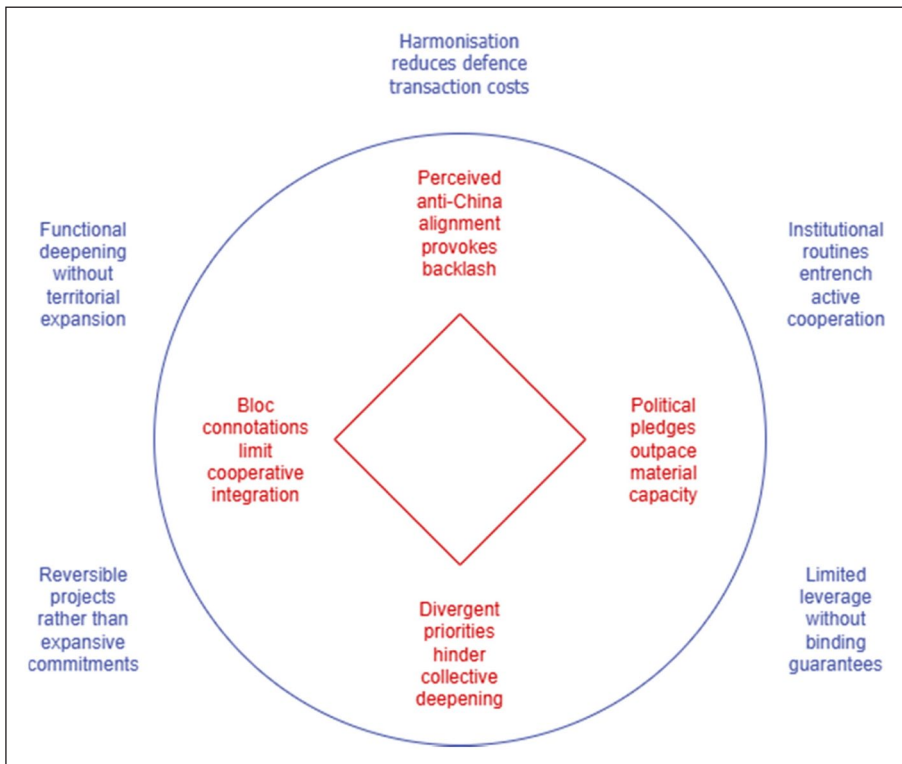


Figure 1. Summary of findings: NATO's "unconventional actor" role in the Indo-Pacific (in blue) and its inherent risks (in red).

Source. Authors' own.

the Alliance fosters practical convergence without a commensurate expansion of binding security obligations, with a growing functional deepening as opposed to territorial extension.

These developments coexist with four primary risks. First, signalling: framing China as a systemic challenge and institutionalising cooperation with IP4 partners has been interpreted by Beijing as alignment against it, inviting diplomatic pushback or coercive countermeasures that complicate partners' own calculations.²⁶ Second, implementation: commitments such as the Defence Industrial Pledge require sustained national investment and industry buy-in; without follow-through, credibility is undermined. Third, internal political fragility: consensus decision-making and divergent national priorities restrict the scope and tempo of institutional deepening. Fourth, partner sensitivity: many Indo-Pacific states accept technical cooperation and capacity-building but resist any modality that resembles securitised bloc alignment. Fifth, resource diversion and burden-sharing politics: this transregional engagement takes place amidst immense internal pressure on core defence expenditures, meaning external coordination cannot be separated from the domestic fiscal realities of the alliance (Figure 1).

Conclusion

NATO's intensified interest in the Indo-Pacific and engagement with regional partners departs from its traditional geographic remit and from force-centred modes of engagement, yet it represents a logical continuation of an alliance adapting to safeguard the Euro-Atlantic. By broadening its threat calculus to encompass China's systemic challenge, extending its scope to non-traditional domains, and deepening ties with the IP4, NATO has developed a modular, partnership-driven, and politically calibrated posture. When analysed through the framework's five parameters, these shifts clarify exactly what the alliance can and cannot achieve in this theatre. Rather than acting as a regionally embedded security actor, NATO functions precisely as an external platform for coordination. This behavioural adaptation aligns with neoliberal institutionalist theory: the alliance serves as an institutional forum that lowers transaction costs, generates reliable data, and fosters repeated interactions. This platform allows member states and IP4 partners to cooperate functionally in non-traditional domains without resorting to politically impossible treaty commitments.

This mode of institutional adaptation provides critical insights into the limits and possibilities of modern transregional coordination. For future partnership design, the findings demonstrate that an alliance can exert meaningful systemic influence outside its primary theatre without expanding its formal defensive umbrella. However, severe constraints remain built into this model. Because this platformised approach relies entirely on voluntary, non-binding coordination, its depth is perpetually bottlenecked by the lowest common denominator of member-state consensus and domestic political sensitivities. Policymakers must therefore infer that while transregional coordination can successfully harmonise security narratives and socialise interoperability standards, it cannot substitute for hard, localised deterrence architectures.

Ultimately, whether this accumulation of platform capacities matures into durable structural linkages or remains merely episodic depends on three empirical developments that merit close tracking. First, the extent to which national industrial pledges convert into measurable surge capacity and supply-chain redundancy across hemispheres. Second, the degree to which IP4 partner states actively institutionalise NATO-derived standards within their domestic doctrine and procurement systems. Third, the balance of costs and benefits partners perceive as they navigate Washington's shifting strategic priorities alongside Beijing's retaliatory responses to visible NATO–IP4 alignment. Monitoring these operational and political variables will determine whether NATO's platformised model offers a resilient framework for transregional governance or remains a politically brittle overlay.

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Notes

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