



# China's discomfort in an American world

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## KEY POINTS

- *China has reemerged as a great power in a world order created and dominated by the United States, and that order has had a profound effect on China's development.*
- *China possesses three personalities. It acts as a civilizational empire, a nation-state, and a globally integrated economic power. The Chinese Communist Party struggles to manage these often-conflicting identities.*
- *A multitude of identities is not unique to China. The United States is both a classical nation-state and an "empire of liberty," and the interaction between the three Chinas and the two Americas will shape the future of Asia.*

If the end of the Cold War provided a temporary reprieve from great-power rivalry, the Sino-American relationship is currently heralding its return. Although strategic competition is not the only dimension of the Sino-American relationship, it is beginning to define it. This turn of events should not surprise Washington. In its short history, the United States has played the role of both rising and established power in rivalries with the United Kingdom, Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. Indeed, the only surprise is that some believed that there would be a "Chinese exception" to the normal course of great-power behavior.

China's rise did not have to be overly problematic. Indeed, Beijing's quest for wealth and power has improved the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese people, as well as contributed to US prosperity. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has certainly acted more responsibly on

the world stage since it abandoned its Maoist radicalism and entered a period of high economic growth known as the "reform and opening."

Why, then, is China's reemergence as a great power a problem for the United States? The challenge for Washington is not that China is richer and more powerful; rather, it is the kind of power that China is becoming under the continued one-party dictatorship of the Chinese Communist Party.

To fully understand the meaning of China's reemergence requires an understanding of the global strategic context of its increased power and prestige. The defining characteristic of that strategic environment is the overwhelming dominance of US power and influence—the US might be the most powerful country that the world has ever seen.<sup>1</sup> From China's point of view, this means that after 200 years of weakness and humiliation, the PRC faces an America that is stronger and more influential than all of China's

previous adversaries combined (though America's dominance is now being challenged in many quarters).

Finding its way in this "world America made" is difficult for the world's last functioning Leninist party that still oversees a civilizational empire.<sup>2</sup> That is, China rules a physical empire that includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and the increasingly oppressed Hong Kong and seeks more territory including Taiwan and the South China Sea. Moreover, that physical empire has an imperial mindset. China does not see itself as just another nation-state among nation-states. Rather, it has a profound sense of itself as the center of civilization and conceives of itself as not just a country but a historically superior civilization that deserves deference from other countries.

Empires and Leninist countries have not fared well in the era of American dominance, and Beijing is vigilant in protecting against the presumed, and in some ways real, ideological and material threat posed by the United States. It is doing so while attempting to reconcile a still-existent imperial mindset with China's development as a modern nation-state. Famed scholar Lucian Pye described China's struggle aptly: it is "a civilization attempting to be a nation-state."<sup>3</sup>

Another layer must be added to these two Chinese identities. China is not only an empire and a nation-state; to gain wealth and power in the American world, China became part of the postmodern, global, capitalist economic system.

Thus, China thinks like an empire, a Leninist-run nation-state, and a highly globalized political economy. China's three personalities mirror British scholar-diplomat Robert Cooper's description of the differing character types of states in the contemporary international system. Cooper identifies three types of countries: premodern, modern, and postmodern.<sup>4</sup> China has elements of all three.

To be sure, having a multitude of identities is not unique to China. The foreign policies of many countries are shaped by competing identities. Most important for China, the United States is both a classical nation-state and an "empire of liberty."<sup>5</sup> Americans believe that their deeply held

principles are universally applicable. The United States vacillates between foreign policies that are based on more narrow national interests and those based on more universal liberal principles.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, many thought that international affairs would take shape along the lines of American universalism—global liberalism would finally triumph.

China had other ideas. Consequently for Beijing, American universalism is as threatening as American military power. Beijing does not make great distinctions among the Clinton administration's spread of liberalism, the freedom agenda of George W. Bush, and the liberal internationalist policies of Barack Obama. The Chinese Communist Party believes that all of these post-Cold War presidents have been eager to change China.

## America: Nation-State or Empire of Liberty?

As Robert Kagan and others have argued, the unique American experiment with political liberty has led to distinct patterns in its conduct of foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> Americans are the true firstborn children of the Enlightenment, made in the image of John Locke, Adam Smith, and Montesquieu.<sup>7</sup> Although the proper and realistic application of America's liberal ideas in foreign affairs has been a matter of great debate among Americans, US leaders have shared at least one common belief: that their country will be safer and more prosperous in a world conducive to political liberty.

Indeed, the hard-nosed creators of the post-World War II American world began their famed strategy document, National Security Council Report 68, with references to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, even though the document was not for public consumption—belying the notion that US leaders use American ideals only to persuade the public to carry out narrow-minded policies.<sup>8</sup> This belief in liberal values has resulted in different varieties of American universalism, tempered by American tendencies toward pragmatism.

On one hand, Americans shaping their country's rise to dominance believed in the Kantian "perpetual peace." American leaders thought that international law and international institutions could govern relations among nations to keep the peace. Many of America's "founding fathers" of great-power foreign policy, such as Dean Acheson, Elihu Root, and Henry Stimson, at least on some level, believed that liberal principles and institutions should help govern the world; hence the International Court of Justice, global disarmament conferences, and international arbitration to resolve disputes. They believed that supranational organizations combined with American power could settle disputes peacefully and perhaps even guide countries on the path of progress and enlightenment.

For example, these statesmen had a role in creating institutions and treaties such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact that criminalized war among nations, the 1920s disarmament pacts, the League of Nations, the United Nations, and economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These institutions concerned themselves with the internal workings of governments and domestic economies, making America party to international litigation and arbitration of commercial disputes. These were legacies of the Enlightenment: peace through reason and enlightened self-interest.

On the other hand, the founding fathers of the American order believed they governed a nation-state in a system of nation-states. They accepted the Westphalian idea of how nation-states would and should behave: international order is a product of sovereign nations treating one another equally under the law; countries would form stable balances of power so that no one could dominate another; and war could be necessary but legitimate only in the defense of territory and sovereignty. As Henry Kissinger has explained:

What we consider international relations today really dates back only to the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. After the suffering caused by religious wars, a new international concept was needed. That international concept had various elements: it introduced for the first time

the notion of sovereignty, that countries were supreme within their borders and that no other country had the right to intervene in their domestic affairs. The borders defined the reach of international law. The use of force across borders could be defined as illegal or as aggression.<sup>9</sup>

Sino-American relations evolve even as the US continues its struggle to balance its universalist "empire of liberty" identity and its role as the enforcer of the nation-state system.

## China in the American World: Empire or Nation-State?

China has struggled with its national identity at least since the decay of the Qing dynasty and the shock of foreign encroachment. In the decades following the 1911 revolution, China experimented with republicanism, democracy, and rule by two different Leninist parties—Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—with each successive governing structure attempting to channel Chinese nationalism.

In 1949, four years after the end of WWII, Mao won the Chinese civil war and proclaimed, "China has stood up."<sup>10</sup> This was surely a statement of national pride in China's revival, but the CCP's civil war victory did not settle the empire versus nation-state debate.

In many ways, Mao acted like a Chinese emperor. Although he knew that China was not strong enough to reestablish the traditional Sinosphere—the Middle Kingdom's old Asian tributaries had gained independence and emerged as strategic actors in their own right—he believed that China's version of communism was universally applicable. He supported Maoist insurgencies throughout Asia and positioned Chinese communism as a purer form of communism than that of the Soviet Union. Mao believed his form of communism could lead the decolonizing and developing world out of poverty, misery, and humiliation.

The imperial Mao had seemingly repudiated the traditions and rule of the Qing dynasty, yet sent his troops to retake the lost Qing territories: Xinjiang in 1949 and Tibet in 1950. His successors would have Hong Kong handed over to them by the British in 1997.<sup>11</sup> To this day, taking Taiwan remains China's paramount strategic goal.

Ultimately, however, Mao had to play modern nation-state politics. He had to adapt to a bipolar power struggle between America's liberal order and Soviet communism. He grudgingly accepted the Westphalian notion of sovereign equals working to establish a stable balance of power. Military force in defense of sovereignty was an important tool of this statecraft. Thus, China went to war to expel the United States from the Korean Peninsula. The Republic of China's attempts to retake the mainland still had to be beaten back. To keep the Americans at bay, Mao needed to "lean to one side"—toward the Soviets—and acquire nuclear weapons from them.<sup>12</sup>

While Mao's reign continued China's hard-wired policies of universalism, he also showed great ideological flexibility in the service of China's more narrow national interests. When the Soviets turned against him, he needed the Americans as his security partner. In his final act, he accepted Richard Nixon's invitation to join the "family of nations" and normalized relations with the hated capitalist United States.<sup>13</sup> A new conception of a Chinese nation-state playing by the rules of classical diplomacy eventually won out, at least for a time, over Chinese universalism.

## The World Deng Entered: Liberalism and Postmodernism

A 20th-century manifestation of US universalism was Washington's offer of membership to the liberal order to all comers and its attempts to persuade the reluctant to accept its belief in the power of free markets and free trade. Richard Nixon's opening to China is the most consequential example of this impulse.

Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in the 1970s began what the *Economist* called "the most dynamic burst of wealth creation in human history."<sup>14</sup> The Chinese people benefited from an international system that proved agile enough to absorb its entry. It seemed as though China was finally becoming a fully modern nation-state.

However, the world order that Deng thought he was joining was rapidly changing. As China was finally fully embracing its role as one of many equal nation-states in the international system, the democratic powers were changing the rules of the game. The international system aligned itself more closely with the ideals of its Anglo-American creators. Westphalian practices of respect for sovereignty were fraying with the rise of the "responsibility to protect" doctrine, in which UN members were granted an implicit right to intercede if dictatorial regimes did not protect their citizens' basic rights. The West moved farther than it ever had before to unshackle itself from the UN charter's limitations on the use of military force. A turning point was NATO's fight against Serbia in Kosovo, conducted without UN approval and on mostly humanitarian grounds.<sup>15</sup>

While Westphalian principles were never as doggedly adhered to as many imagine, the 21st-century postmodern project offered some unique changes to the modern system of international relations. In Europe, rich and powerful countries attempted to shed nationalism and cede sovereignty voluntarily. According to Cooper:

The postmodern system in which we Europeans live does not rely on balance; nor does it emphasize sovereignty or the separation of domestic and foreign affairs. The European Union has become a highly developed system for mutual interference in each other's domestic affairs. . . . The CFE Treaty, under which parties to the treaty have to notify the location of their heavy weapons and allow inspections, subjects areas close to the core of sovereignty to international constraints. It is important to realize what an extraordinary revolution this is.<sup>16</sup>

When such a powerful group of nations so radically changes its ideas about how security and prosperity are obtained, it shakes the world. Of course, Cooper is expressing the ideal of what postmodern nation-states aspire to, rather than the continuing realities of modern European international politics.

Western leaders lauded the new international system. As then-NATO Secretary General Javier Solana stated in 1998, “The Westphalian model is inhospitable to international law and norms that are valued widely today in the West, such as democracy and human rights.”<sup>17</sup> A leading American foreign affairs commentator expressed this view:

Our notion of sovereignty must . . . be conditional, even contractual, rather than absolute. . . . The diplomatic challenge for this era is to gain widespread support for principles of state conduct and a procedure for determining remedies when these principles are violated.<sup>18</sup>

## China, the Fraying of Westphalia, and Postmodern Geoeconomics

Just as they were gaining comfort with the practice of modern international politics and economics, the Chinese were shocked by this turn of events. Former National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recounts conversations with Jiang Zemin, former general secretary of the Communist Party, who was eager to finish Deng Xiaoping’s work and accept the modern international system. He noted, “Jiang was cosmopolitan enough to understand that China would have to operate within an international system rather than through Middle Kingdom remoteness or dominance.”<sup>19</sup>

In the long sweep of history, this type of “modern” nation-state international relations is still relatively new. The longer history of international relations is that kingdoms, empires, and religions fought one another for supremacy.

After WWII, the allied victors formed the United Nations in part to reaffirm Westphalian principles that had been violated by the Nazis in Germany and the fascists in Japan. International politics was to be organized around equal nation-states with well-defined borders. What went on inside those borders was not supposed to concern other nation-states.<sup>20</sup>

Jiang insisted to Kissinger that the United States and China work with each other to solidify an order based on Westphalian principles—the traditional state system. According to Jiang, China was ready to overcome its “Middle Kingdom remoteness [and] dominance”—the old Chinese civilizational world order. It was ready, after more than a century, to play by the Westphalian rules, but this very modern notion of world order seemed to be disappearing.

Playing by the Westphalian rules proved more idea than reality as China became an important player in what some call the third wave of globalization. Observers note that the first wave of globalization was tied to the Industrial Revolution, when steamships reduced the cost of international transportation and railroads could move goods within countries more cheaply. Nations that could embrace this new and faster trade did so.<sup>21</sup>

The second wave of globalization came after World War II. Statesmen created a new system of finance, commerce, and global monetary policy. They set up trading institutions such as the WTO to lower international trade barriers and other restrictions. Not surprisingly, exports as a share of gross world product multiplied. When the WTO failed, countries negotiated bilateral trade agreements to lower tariff barriers.

But the third wave of globalization further changed the world. Technological innovations changed the nature of global production. Perhaps the most important technological innovation for driving new phases of globalization was the containerized ship. As Marc Levinson writes in *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*, entrepreneur Malcolm McLean’s idea to build containers that can transport cargo from land (via trucks or railroads) to ships without ever being opened and repackaged revolutionized international trade.<sup>22</sup> Prices of shipping went

down dramatically as efficiency increased allowing China to fast become a maritime trading nation with eight of the twenty largest international ports. Alongside these improvements in shipping and transportation came the information and communications revolution, which meant that ideas, innovations, money, and commerce could be exchanged instantaneously via computer networks.

The rise of the multinational enterprise also revolutionized global economics. Companies began to design in one location, manufacture in another, conduct research and development in yet another, and assemble and process for export in yet another.<sup>23</sup> According to a McKinsey Global Institute report, “Flows of goods, services, and finance reached \$26 trillion in 2012, or 36 percent of global GDP, 1.5 times the level in 1990. Now, one in three goods crosses national borders, and more than one-third of financial investments are international transactions. . . . Global flows could reach \$54 trillion to \$85 trillion by 2025, more than double or triple their current scale.”<sup>24</sup>

This new type of economics required new political arrangements. Politicians and economic managers had to agree on new laws and regulations, the removal of barriers to trade in goods and services, the freer movement of workers, standards for shipping, and other modes of transport. Constructing and maintaining the postmodern economy required countries that participated in it to surrender absolute sovereignty and abide by ever-increasing international laws and regulations.

What resulted was a global economic system in which boundaries mattered less than before. According to Edward Steinfeld, this globalization “is not really about different parts of the world trading at arm’s length and competing head to head. Quite to the contrary, it is about the world, including places once considered the farthest frontiers, getting pulled into sourcing and production systems that once existed in only one firm.”<sup>25</sup>

China chose to become a player in this new economic order. The country became a key link in a global supply and production chain—an export base for multinational corporations. A modernizing, industrializing China, dominated by state-owned enterprises, embraced the next wave

of globalization. Steinfeld argues that it was really in the 1990s, a decade after the beginning of Deng’s reforms, that China’s “domestic revolution” began, one that was “intimately linked” with the “globalization revolution.”<sup>26</sup>

According to Steinfeld, China took part in a “revolutionary” new mode of global production, with great success. The new wave of globalization beginning in the late 1980s/early 1990s involved “really for the first time in history, a truly global organization of production. . . . It is to this world that China hitched its fate and experienced an epic domestic transformation as a consequence.”<sup>27</sup>

China’s price for choosing this high-payoff path of economic growth was the forfeiture of some sovereignty and control. The ferocious logic of the new international economic regime required changes in Chinese internal governance. To prosper, the Chinese party-state had to change. Important regulatory bodies became less political and more technocratic, less tied to CCP doctrine and more open to new ideas. Rules and economic systems created elsewhere clearly “interfered” with China’s sovereignty.

Certainly, the CCP sets most rules and continues to define its many domestic institutions, but by choosing to integrate with the international economy at the time that it did, China accepted quite a bit of interference in its internal affairs. Beijing encouraged Western firms to bring in Western managers, workers, ideas, and regulations that would allow Chinese industries to be restructured for growth.

In international finance, China embraced the new globalization with similar verve. This financial system is dominated by the United States, with the dollar as the reserve currency. For Beijing, a somewhat perverse consequence of China’s seemingly traditional economic development path (favoring exporters over importers and producers over consumers) is that to modernize, it had to become more reliant on the international, which meant the American, financial system. To keep its exports competitive, China pegged its currency to the dollar, and the intervention needed to maintain the peg led to the massive accumulation of dollar reserve assets. In so doing China has had to give up a modicum of control over its financial policy.<sup>28</sup>

## A New Type of Great Power? The Three Chinas

By the first decade of the 21st century, when China's ascendance was in full bloom, it had developed three international personalities. First, it is a modern nation-state governed by a functioning Leninist party. This China is the one the US focuses its energies on. US strategies of engagement and containment are meant to, on one hand, convince China of the benefits of the order it has built and, on the other, to make sure China cannot successfully overturn it. This China is arguably the world's greatest defender of the Westphalian principle of "noninterference in countries' internal affairs" and the UN charter's very specific and limited notions of when a country can use force.<sup>29</sup>

Postmodern China is less concerned with balance-of-power politics, military issues, or territorial sovereignty. Globalization has created a class of Chinese citizens who are international elites—"Davos Men," who are more cosmopolitan than nationalistic, more at home with other cosmopolitan business, cultural, and economic leaders than their own countrymen—who divide their time between China and Western centers of technology and finance. The Chinese "Argonauts," as University of California Berkeley professor AnnaLee Saxenian writes, were educated in the US and circulate their knowledge and innovations between Shanghai and Silicon Valley.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, China still retains both its physical empire and the "mind of an empire."<sup>31</sup> The PRC continues to rule people in Xinjiang and Tibet who do not want to be part of China. Beijing regained Hong Kong and incrementally presses the relatively free city to accept intrusive CCP rule. It is diplomatically and militarily postured to secure the unification of a de facto independent Taiwan. This is imperial revanchism—the desire to reestablish Chinese rule over territories that were once under Qing and Ming rule.

Many Chinese strategic elites give great weight to the fact that the Qing and Ming dynasties had tributary relationships with what are now

Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Ryukyu Islands (now in Japanese hands). China's territorial claims are not just a matter of power politics or of conflicting interests that can be resolved through diplomacy and international law. Rather, China believes that it has "rights" in a more powerful and profound sense: China is a universalist empire whose leaders rule "all under heaven."<sup>32</sup>

Nation-states are able to recognize each other's legitimate claims, even if they disagree with them. Classical diplomacy allows for flexibility as to what serves a nation's interest at any given time. Countries accept that an ultimate solution might mean the abandonment of claims based solely on what they deem just. This is especially true if countries view one another as sovereign equals.

In contrast, imperial claims are zero sum. Empires believe that others countries have lesser status. They are tributaries, full of barbarians and vassals. Imperial claims have ideological underpinnings: since empires believe their rule is universal and of the highest virtue, the room for diplomatic give and take narrows. Indeed, China does not believe that there is room for negotiation on China's borders or territories in the South China Sea. To the imperial mind, Taiwan is part of the imperium, and historical justice demands its return. The fact that the island has developed into a free-market democracy with a serious case for international recognition does not matter to Beijing.

## China's Future: Will a "True" China Emerge?

No country develops in a linear fashion. The question is will the nation-state be China's dominant identity as it is today, either along the lines of its Leninist structure or manifested in another form? Or will Chinese civilizational universalism dominate? What about the forces of postmodern globalization? One thing is certain: the China I have described will not be the China of 2030.

Given the difficulty a one-party state has in managing the three Chinas it is worth also considering whether the PRC is decaying, much

like its Qing predecessor. The Qing-Confucian bureaucracy was unable to adapt to the economic and social changes of 19th-century China. Likewise, it famously would not adapt to modern statecraft.

Historian David Landes points out that the Qing, unlike the West, did not develop the checks on the state, the free markets, and the property rights Westerners were beginning to enjoy. They did not innovate. The emperor and the elite reveled in cultural superiority and rejected most Western learning.<sup>33</sup> The failure to reform its imperial system made responding to foreign encroachments impossible. Internal decay and foreign policy humiliation led to regime collapse and years of warlordism and civil war.

What about today? Is the CCP adapting fast enough to both internal pressures and consequential changes in the external environment? In terms of openness to the best political, economic and scientific ideas is China actually backsliding? Today, as in the 19th century, China faces seemingly insoluble internal problems. Environmental degradation has caused scarcity in water supply and arable land, rendering China increasingly dependent on many food products from abroad.<sup>34</sup>

The one-child policy and consequent sex-selective abortions have resulted in the twin demographic disasters of a rapidly aging population and a surplus of males. China's demographics will look akin to those of Europe and Japan by 2030.<sup>35</sup>

The physical empire is becoming more restive, particularly Xinjiang. Some Uighurs are radicalizing in response to China's repressive practices and may develop connections with radical jihadi groups.<sup>36</sup> Self-immolations in Tibet and Sichuan raise the specter of a larger blaze to come. Recent events in Hong Kong, meanwhile, are a reminder that China will do whatever it takes to suppress democracy movements demanding more autonomy from the empire.<sup>37</sup> But that is not an easy task, particularly in a partially postmodern world in which protest movements can quickly gain international support.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the CCP is what the party would call the "growing contradictions within its system." In

experimenting with economic liberalism, the party set up an inevitable clash between continued authoritarian governance and the energies and aspirations of the Chinese people. As Evan Osnos describes in his book *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*, the Chinese people are no longer solely satisfied with material well-being and state-sanctioned nationalism.<sup>39</sup> The Pew Center estimates that China now has some 67 million Christians, pointing to a spiritual restlessness in China that the Chinese Communist Party is incapable of addressing.<sup>40</sup> Tom Phillips, a leading scholar of Christianity in China, believes that China will soon have the world's largest Christian population.<sup>41</sup> This phenomenon is both a reaction to Leninist modernism and a result of the partial embrace of postmodernism—easier contact with international religions has provided succor to Chinese embarking on a religious/spiritual journey.

The two-centuries-long Chinese modernization project has left it with the legacies of empire, with strong attempts to become a modern nation-state, and with "postmodern" citizens embedded in the liberal order pushing for greater liberalism. Can the CCP really manage its three personalities?

## China and the United States and Asia

The Sino-American interaction will shape the future of Asia, if not the world. The United States has, since its birth, struggled with its universal and parochial identities. But the world has grown accustomed to these conflicting foreign policy impulses: they no longer cause systemic disruption to world order.

In contrast, China's similar struggles are occurring as it grows in power and prestige. The Chinese drama is happening in real time, and Asia is struggling to adjust. The stakes are very high as America's future could well be more intertwined with Asia this century than with any other region.

The challenge for the United States in Asia is manifold, but first it must decide whether it will

continue to shape and defend the world order it created. Should the US decide to continue its post–World War II role, it must think more deeply about what kind of Asia is in its interests. Asia’s history is very different than Europe’s. The three types of nations described here are predominantly a Western phenomenon and a Western story developed as a response to Western geopolitics.

The very idea of nationhood and the practice of classical diplomacy do not yet have strong roots—particularly, the emerging nations of Southeast Asia. Burma, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia are all only a generation away from colonial rule. Many of these countries still struggle with the basics of national identity such as territorial sovereignty, ethnic strife, and the development of general principles upon which leaders can govern. They are now also faced with a powerful China that is part nation-state, part empire, part liberalizing postmodern country.

The United States cannot assume that all of Asia is part of the “liberal order.” Many of these countries need to more fully develop their identities as modern nation-states and practice the kind of statecraft necessary to create a workable Asian political order. They can do so only if they are free from a convulsive China working out its three personalities.

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## Notes

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