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Charting the Course *Directions for the New NATO Secretary General*

POLICY BRIEF



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A new leader is preparing to take the helm of the world's most powerful military alliance as it enters a time of strategic transition. On October 1, former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg will take over from Anders Fogh Rasmussen as secretary general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This transition comes at a time of both increasing threats to NATO member states and broadly declining alliance military capabilities. Ahead of this transition, NATO heads of state and leaders from dozens of NATO partner countries will meet later this week in Newport, Wales. The summit, the first since 2012, comes as NATO is preparing to end its combat mission in Afghanistan and is grappling with ongoing instability in Ukraine. The alliance plans to unveil a number of important new initiatives in Wales, highlighting its resolve, resilience and agility. That said, the next secretary general will face a daunting list of challenges as he seeks to balance NATO's internal dynamics,

the alliance's future missions and evolving relationships with partners.

This policy brief charts a course for the next NATO secretary general, to help him set priorities early in his tenure that will guide his full term in office. We identify four sets of challenges that include both the toughest problems and most promising opportunities for NATO. They correspond to the four cardinal directions of a compass — East, West, South and North, as we discuss below. Focusing on these core issues will help provide strategic direction for addressing NATO's challenges and structuring a wide range of future alliance activities.

The East: Russia Returns

Nearly 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the alliance once again finds its attention drawn to the east. With the annexation of Crimea and ongoing involvement in the violence in eastern Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive actions seem aimed at restoring the economic, political and geostrategic power of the former Soviet

Union.¹ Russia has reemerged as a serious threat to NATO member states, particularly those on NATO's eastern periphery. As General Philip Breedlove, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, has noted, this has spurred a "paradigm shift" for NATO.²

Russia's takeover of Crimea earlier this year marked the first time since World War II that a great power has directly annexed another state's territory. Moreover, Putin's support for separatists in Ukraine has triggered the first armed conflict in Europe since Russia's 2008 war with Georgia. Russia's actions in Ukraine embody Putin's new strategic outlook. While the Obama administration's "reset" policy did not assume a benign Russia - through the eased tensions and broader cooperation that characterized U.S.- and NATO-Russia relations in the early years of the Obama administration ended with Dmitry Medvedev's term as president. Today's Russia is fomenting unrest affecting the entire region. The 1990s-era agreements that persuaded Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons, then the world's third largest stockpile, are now at risk, threatening the broader nonproliferation agenda.³ Moreover, international norms of air safety have been severely disrupted after Ukrainian separatists shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, killing 298 civilians.

NATO faces two key challenges in responding to Russia's revanchism and aggression. First, it must provide robust, sustained reassurance to its easternmost members that substantially exceeds what has been provided to date. For years, the alliance has offered reassurance to its Central and Eastern European members - who have consistently warned about the threat from Russia - through the Baltic Air Policing Mission, regular exercises and ensuring contingency plans are kept up to date. However, divergent views among NATO members outside of Central and Eastern Europe have undermined more robust reassurance initiatives. Moreover, the terms of the NATO-Russia Founding

Act of 1997 prohibited the permanent stationing of conventional forces in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴ With its annexation of Crimea and military support for separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, however, we believe Russia has abrogated the terms of that agreement. This provides an opportunity for the West to consider basing forces in the area, though Russia would certainly see such moves as provocative.

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The United States has led the alliance's reassurance efforts through a series of supporting efforts, both bilaterally and through NATO. Most notably, the Obama administration has proposed the \$1 billion European Reassurance Initiative, which is awaiting Congressional approval.⁵ However, as Norwegian Minister of Defense Ine Eriksen Søreide has noted, "there is a real risk that we Europeans interpret the new package that was launched as a signal that the U.S. will do more and that we are off the hook. On the contrary, I see this as even a further challenge to Europe, accentuating the need for us to respond by increasing Europe's contributions to collective security."⁶ Along with increases in funding for short-term efforts, eastern allies will be more reassured if they know that all NATO members will contribute to long-term, more permanent measures such as buttressing their conventional capabilities.

Second, NATO needs to find effective ways to respond to emerging unconventional threats. The Ukraine crisis illuminates not only Russian goals for its near abroad but also the unconventional tactics

the Russian military and intelligence apparatuses can deploy in support of those aims. Some have called these tactics “non-linear war,” which is characterized by covert subversion, secretive deployment of special forces, targeted propaganda, cyber attacks and a steady flow of often sophisticated weapons.⁷ Such tactics are hardly new, but Putin has skillfully escalated and advanced the conflict in a calibrated fashion that has remained just below the threshold that might trigger a NATO response.

Traditionally, the alliance has focused on conventional threats to its security. But as Russia is demonstrating, asymmetric threats are now a very real part of today’s security environment, and NATO is notably unprepared to respond to them. A NATO that would have no hesitation responding militarily to Russian tanks rolling across the Estonian border, for example, might well be flummoxed by covert Russian special operators sent into Estonia to “protect” Russian minorities. Preparations for unconventional warfare should also consider how NATO would respond to cyber threats against its members. Many of these are ongoing, and originate from state actors such as Russia, China and Iran. They can also readily come from non-state groups including terrorists, organized criminals and hacktivists. To date, NATO has failed to define what constitutes a cyber attack on a member state and what support other members might provide if such an attack occurs.⁸ NATO has also failed to coordinate assistance or information sharing for members who lack even basic cyber capabilities and threat intelligence.

The secretary general should take the following actions to help the alliance address the challenges of a resurgent Russia and unconventional threats:

Develop a more effective response to aggression that falls below the Article 5 threshold. Across all domains, the new secretary general should launch

a dialogue looking at what activities might trigger Article 4 consultations or an Article 5 response. Alliance leaders should also increase scenario-based planning and tabletop exercises that examine specific high-risk scenarios to help identify shortfalls and prepare potential policy responses. More immediately, Secretary General-designate Stoltenberg will need to ensure that NATO’s tasking to review contingency plans for non-linear threats produces real results and does not lose steam if the Ukraine crisis falls off the front pages.

Deepen cyber cooperation across NATO. The alliance must confront this central threat to its members’ security. Early efforts have shown progress, particularly in securing NATO networks. But the alliance needs to do more to determine required capabilities and security obligations in this rapidly changing field. Too many NATO members still lack basic knowledge of the evolving nature of the cyber threat.

Evaluate options for stationing permanent or rotational forces in Central and Eastern Europe. NATO is already taking steps in this direction,⁹ but tasking the NATO Response Force (NRF) to be ready for such a contingency would ensure a whole-of-alliance approach. NATO would need to improve the NRF’s readiness and deployability for this type of scenario.

Avoid reinforcing perceptions of a vulnerable “gray zone” of states between NATO and Russia. Although a lack of consensus means that further NATO enlargement is off the table for the foreseeable future, NATO should continue its efforts to help reassure countries such as Moldova and Georgia. For example, the alliance should not only increase the number of exercises these countries can join but consider holding more exercises *in* these countries as well. The alliance should also enhance security assistance more broadly, including strengthening the capabilities of these states and increasing their interoperability with NATO forces.

The West: Trans-Atlantic Roles, Missions and Resources

To meet the external threats to the alliance, the next secretary general will need to resolve a number of tough internal management challenges. In order to do so, he will need to look west – to posture the alliance, both in military and political terms, to confront the changing strategic environment.¹⁰ Secretary General designate Stoltenberg must rebuild consensus around a transatlantic agenda that matches resources with rhetoric. Failure to close this gap risks fundamentally undermining NATO's credibility and losing the support of publics on both sides of the Atlantic.

Doing so first requires recognizing the shifting direction of U.S. global priorities. The Obama administration's rebalance to focus more resources on the Asia-Pacific represents a response to long-term strategic trends and the growth of economic and military power in the region – most prominently in China. The United States will certainly continue to respond to specific contingencies in Europe and the Middle East. But the increasing U.S. focus on Asia constitutes a shift that will almost surely continue over the course of several administrations, regardless of political party. European leaders must come to terms with this reality, which is in large part based on the inexorable movement of the world's economic center of gravity towards Asia.

At the same time, the U.S. rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific does not mean America is leaving or abandoning Europe (or the Middle East). The U.S. Defense Department's 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* explicitly states, "Given our deep and abiding interests in maintaining and expanding European security and prosperity, we will continue our work with allies and partners to promote regional stability and Euro-Atlantic integration."¹¹ America's crucial support for NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya, its reassurance efforts in

the wake of Russian intervention in Ukraine and its continued commitment to improve European missile defense demonstrate America's commitment to European security and support of NATO allies. The United States still considers Europe and its NATO allies its "partner of first resort."¹²

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These trends will require NATO to reach a new transatlantic consensus on alliance roles and missions. Broadly, that will likely mean more European responsibility for crisis management in Europe and its backyard, particularly in North Africa but also in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹³ A more activist approach in the Middle East and North Africa made up of diplomatic efforts (backed by force when necessary) from European partners can help offset shifts in U.S. military capabilities.

Forging this consensus will require addressing the perennial question of what resources NATO's European member states contribute to alliance defense. The trends are nearly all negative. While 15 of 28 members have enjoyed three consecutive years of growth in their gross domestic products (GDPs), only four met the NATO benchmark of spending two percent of GDP on defense in 2013 – the United States, the United Kingdom, Estonia and Greece. Only three meet all NATO guidelines for deployability and sustainability of their forces. Over the last five years, Russia has increased defense spending by 50 percent while the allies decreased theirs by an average of 20 percent.¹⁴ As a recent RAND report noted, "a Libyan-type scenario is the upper limit to any NATO Europe Mediterranean policing or intervention capability."¹⁵ NATO documents

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

NORTH

- Institute an Arctic Security Initiative to begin coordinating regional maritime security.
- Consider making NATO the lead organization for security in the Arctic.
- Emphasize Arctic security as an important area of cooperation with Russia.

WEST

- Pursue the “framework nations” concept proposed by Germany.
- Measure alliance contributions by capabilities rather than defense spending.
- Sustain the advanced levels of command and control interoperability gained in Afghanistan.
- Revitalize military officer exchange programs.

EAST

- Develop a more effective response to aggression that falls below the Article 5 threshold.
- Deepen cyber cooperation across NATO.
- Evaluate options for stationing permanent or rotational forces in Central and Eastern Europe.
- Avoid reinforcing perceptions of a vulnerable “gray zone” of states between NATO and Russia.

SOUTH

- Prepare to help Turkey address spillover from the Syrian civil war and threats from ISIS.
- Determine how to address potential conventional and nuclear threats from Iran.
- Build robust cooperation with the European Union on energy security.
- Launch a lessons-learned study on Libya and Afghanistan.
- Open a candid dialogue on emerging security issues.

suggest that alliance planners recognize the much-diminished strength of their conventional militaries even compared with 10 years ago. And as a recent UK parliamentary report noted, “NATO is currently not well-prepared for a Russian threat against a NATO Member State.”¹⁶

NATO’s European members can increase their defense capabilities in three ways. They can increase defense spending, they can spend the money already allocated more efficiently by pooling and sharing resources, or they can do both simultaneously. All present political challenges. But if they do not do at least one of these three things, NATO risks withering away into “collective military irrelevance.”¹⁷

To effectively address these internal management and capabilities issues, the new secretary general should:

Pursue the “framework nations” concept proposed by Germany. According to this concept, lead nations would head regional groupings to fill existing gaps in NATO capabilities and provide that capability to the alliance when needed.¹⁸ This would enable the European members of NATO to significantly improve their military contributions to the alliance without requiring great increases in defense spending. The concept does carry some risks, because NATO could be left without access to these capabilities if the lead nation decides not to participate in an alliance operation. The secretary general should initiate a serious debate about this proposal, and seek creative ways to mitigate that risk so that the benefits of this concept can be realized.

Measure alliance contributions by capabilities rather than defense spending. NATO’s goal of having all member states spend two percent of their GDP on defense focuses solely on inputs towards buying and fielding military capabilities. But when

it comes time to fight, outputs matter most. Some member states allocate their defense budgets much more efficiently, resulting in more combat power that the alliance can call upon. NATO should explore alternate metrics to measure capability outputs.¹⁹ This alternate measure should reward member states that most effectively manage the money they already spend on defense.

Sustain the advanced levels of command and control interoperability gained in Afghanistan.

NATO command and control interoperability is better today than it has ever been, but will fade quickly without intentional upkeep.²⁰ A robust series of joint exercises is necessary to help maintain the interoperability that would allow NATO to fight effectively across a number of different conflict scenarios. Such an exercise program should include a mix of both simulations and field exercises.

Revitalize military officer exchange programs. These decreased significantly during the Afghanistan conflict. Revitalizing this exchange program will be essential for building and sustaining working relationships across the alliance, especially since fewer U.S. military forces are now based abroad than at any time in the previous few decades.

The South: Threats from the Middle East and North Africa

On its southern flank, in an arc from West Africa to Iran, the alliance faces significant threats stemming from the major upheavals and regional power struggles across the Muslim world. NATO must continue to address threats emanating from this quarter, even while it renews its focus on the east.²¹ When NATO took over command and control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in 2003, it marked the first time that the alliance had undertaken combat operations outside of Europe. ISAF has been seen as a crucial test of alliance unity and political will,

and it epitomized the “out of area or out of business” challenge. As ISAF winds down at the end of this year, new challenges from Russia emerge and alliance nations feel ever-increasing budgetary pressure, NATO risks falling into an “out of area, none of our business” approach that fails to address the irregular threats proliferating in its southern neighborhood.

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NATO faces three significant threats from this region, beyond its humanitarian interests in ongoing conflicts. First, Iran poses a regional threat to the security of alliance nations, because of its pursuit of nuclear weapons and its increasingly advanced ballistic missiles capabilities, which could employ either conventional or nuclear warheads. While NATO is not directly involved, the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom are part of the P5+1 talks with Iran on its nuclear program (along with Russia and China). The outcome of these talks will have major security implications for the alliance. If they succeed, NATO must still be able to protect alliance members from *conventional* ballistic missile threats from Iran.²² If they fail and Iran continues to pursue a nuclear weapon, the alliance could face questions

about possible involvement in a U.S.-led military operation against Iran’s nuclear program. If the U.S. military led an attack against Iran’s nuclear program, NATO would have to decide how to respond to the likely Iranian backlash throughout the region – even if other NATO members do not participate in the operation. Such a backlash could include direct actions against U.S. allies, as well as attacks against U.S. bases and personnel stationed in NATO member countries. Alternatively, if Iran successfully constructs one or more nuclear weapons, alliance members will have to grapple with how they would contribute to a containment regime.²³ This would require the alliance to examine its future plans for missile defense, including whether European members would field significant assets to contribute to an integrated air and missile defense architecture under the European Phased Adaptive Approach.²⁴

Second, Europe has a stake in the stability of the Middle East and North Africa because of energy flows from Libya to the Eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Gulf. Concerns about stability are growing more acute as European alliance members look to diversify energy sources away from Russia. Growing tensions with Russia will further complicate Europe’s energy picture and increase the economic and political importance of energy flows from this region. As former U.S. National Security Advisor General James Jones (Ret.) has said, “Energy can be the ultimate 21st century security issue. If NATO is to remain relevant well into this next decade, the Alliance must be more closely involved in strategic discussions about energy security, working in cooperation with the European Union.”²⁵

Finally, terrorism is arguably now an equal or greater threat to both Europe and the United States than before 2001.²⁶ More foreign fighters are waging war with jihadist groups in Syria and

Iraq than fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Of the estimated 12,000 foreign fighters that have fought in Syria, 3,000 hold passports from Western countries, and the majority of those come from Europe (including Russia).²⁷ Alliance intelligence and domestic security services fear that foreign fighters with experience in Syria and Iraq will return to the West, but NATO has little authority or capacity for tracking such movements. Turkey, a NATO member that borders both countries, has already experienced attacks on its soil as a result of these neighboring conflicts. To date, Turkey has not requested support from NATO other than the deployment of Patriot missiles. But if the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continues to gain ground, Turkey could request further NATO assistance. Alliance members need to be prepared for this possibility, and discuss potential responses.

To help address the threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa, the new secretary general should:

Prepare to help Turkey address spillover from the Syrian civil war and threats from ISIS. The secretary general should push the alliance towards scenario-based planning against these threats and assess what forms of diplomatic and military assistance might be provided should things deteriorate further in the region. The alliance should consider deploying expanded intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to monitor terrorist infiltration from the conflict zone. It should also consider pushing Ankara to crack down on jihadi flows into Bulgaria and Greece.

Determine how to address potential conventional and nuclear threats from Iran. NATO should start a formal internal discussion on managing Iran's likely response if diplomatic talks fail and the United States or Israel strikes Iran's nuclear program. Alternatively, the alliance could explore what will be needed to deter and/or contain a

nuclear-armed Iran over the next 10 years, including what allied capabilities would be necessary for this mission given other priorities. The four NATO members who participate in the P5+1 talks should lead these discussions.

Build robust cooperation with the European Union on energy security. The unrest in the Middle East and Russia's continued use of energy as an instrument of coercion, combined with the growth in energy production in North America and the eastern Mediterranean, make energy security a key point of collaboration between NATO and the EU. The two institutions have struggled to work together, but energy security should provide a pathway for both institutions collaborate effectively – and deliver more coherent outcomes.

Launch a lessons-learned study on Libya and Afghanistan. The two most recent NATO conflicts had many differences, but both struggled with how to deal with post-conflict stability missions as well as how to manage roles and missions within the alliance. The new secretary general should order a lessons-learned study to ensure the alliance retains the hard-earned knowledge from Operation Unified Protector and ISAF. In particular, the study should examine NATO interoperability, command and control, and intelligence, as well as the need to cooperate with the EU and other partners that can help build institutions of governance.

Open a candid dialogue on emerging security issues. NATO needs to greatly improve its situational awareness and intelligence sharing about current and emerging crises to prepare coherent and relevant responses to them. Too often NATO leaders avoid discussing current crises for fear that even preliminary discussions will cascade members down a slippery slope and force them to take action. But serious policy issues in any alliance need to be discussed *in advance* in order to coordinate member responses, share insights and

intelligence, identify areas of agreement and disagreement and shape the development and fielding of capabilities. A possible contingency with Iran or the humanitarian needs stemming from the conflict in Syria, for example, are looming issues that should be discussed.

The North: Security for a New Frontier

The importance of the Arctic, or “High North,” will grow substantially over the coming years. The Arctic is NATO’s newest front, and given Russia’s assertive stance, one that is rapidly becoming contested. It is the only region that borders NATO states in both Europe and North America, and this directly affects both hemispheres of the alliance in ways the eastern alliance border does not. Climate change is already accelerating the melting of the Arctic ice, which will eventually open new passages for global shipping, expanded opportunities for resource development and the continued need for environmental stewardship.²⁸

NATO’s role in the Arctic has been the subject of some dispute in recent years. Canada has pushed to keep NATO in a limited role, and Secretary General Rasmussen publicly endorsed this position in May 2013.²⁹ However, Russia’s intervention in Ukraine has altered many alliance perceptions about the nature of Russian intentions. NATO members are increasingly concerned about Russia’s willingness to use force to advance its interests, potentially to include in the Arctic.³⁰ Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic region has stoked those fears. It has included reviving Soviet-era bases in the region, establishing an Arctic military command, expanding its submarine fleet and flying strategic bombers over the region once again.³¹ Russia’s military activities have not only focused on the Arctic, but on Nordic nations as well. A mock bombing run in Sweden that caught Swedish air defenses unprepared has added to the already lively debates in Sweden and Finland about whether they should

pursue NATO membership.³² These aggressive Russian activities have raised questions among member states about the logic behind NATO’s decision to maintain a low profile in the Arctic.

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Increasing NATO involvement in Arctic affairs would not amount to “militarizing” the region, at least not beyond what Russia’s activities have already done. Greater NATO attention to the Arctic would primarily focus on ensuring the Article 5 protections of member states with territory in the region. Four of five states with Arctic coastlines are NATO members (the United States, Canada, Denmark and Norway) and five of the eight Arctic Council members are also NATO members (the previously mentioned states plus Iceland).³³ Greater NATO involvement in the Arctic would also present an opportunity for broader cooperation with Russia. These initiatives would position NATO as a force for stability in the Arctic, much as it is in the Mediterranean.

Raising the profile of Arctic issues in alliance deliberations and operations would have additional structural benefits for the alliance. First, it would more closely tie the United States and Canada with the European members of the alliance by focusing on the territorial security of all member states. Second, a greater NATO presence in the Arctic would provide participating European members of NATO an opportunity for stronger connections to Asia. In the near future, increased shipping through the Arctic will make it centrally important to both NATO and the Asia-Pacific – and will

increasingly connect Pacific nations like China, Japan and South Korea to Europe. Those routes would bypass traditional chokepoints in the Strait of Malacca and Suez Canal, alleviating one of the causes of tension in the South China Sea.³⁴

In order to address these new Arctic challenges, new secretary general should:

Institute an Arctic Security Initiative to begin coordinating regional maritime security.

Working under a framework nations approach, Canada, Denmark or Norway might serve as the lead nation coordinating Arctic security cooperation among NATO allies. Specific initiatives might include forums for consultation, joint exercises, air surveillance and policing, cooperation on satellite imagery for weather forecasting, cooperation with Russia on logistics and NATO Maritime Command contributions to creating an international maritime code of safety for ships operating in polar waters.³⁵ Given the long lead time required for the development of Arctic capabilities and infrastructure, NATO must begin planning now in order to avoid being left behind. Failure to grasp this opportunity could open a major alliance security gap while bypassing opportunities for security cooperation.

Consider making NATO the lead organization for security in the Arctic. Russia would almost surely oppose such a move, preferring to keep Arctic issues among the smaller group of Arctic Council nations or working bilaterally. But NATO would not replicate existing international institutions by doing so, since the Arctic Council charter states that, “The Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security.”³⁶ NATO’s core tasks include protecting the territorial integrity of its member states and the maritime shipping routes that supply them. The opening of the Arctic stands to expose key NATO vulnerabilities in both. By establishing NATO as the main security provider in

the Arctic, the next secretary general can establish a legacy as a forward-thinking leader who positioned the alliance to address emerging challenges from this important region for decades to come.

Emphasize Arctic security as an important area of cooperation with Russia.

Despite increased tensions in other areas, the Arctic remains an area where cooperation between NATO and Russia might continue. Increased NATO capabilities that will enable member states to operate in the Arctic are mainly designed to foster free flow of civilian trade and transit. Such an effort could maintain, if not increase, trust and working-level cooperation between NATO and Russia even as broader relations may worsen.

Conclusion

As the next NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg will confront a fundamentally different situation than his predecessor. As the alliance ends most of its operations in Afghanistan, it is facing a number of urgent internal and external issues competing for alliance attention and resources. These issues little resemble the challenges NATO was originally formed to address, and few of them reflect the unprecedented demands made on the alliance over the last decade in Afghanistan. New thinking and bold leadership is required.

As the strategic environment grows more challenging, perhaps the biggest test for the alliance will be whether member states provide the resources and commitments necessary to meet those challenges. Second only to that task is revitalizing the trans-Atlantic compact between the United States, Canada and Europe upon which the alliance was built. The new security challenges of the 21st century involve a volatile, uncertain and increasingly unstable international environment. NATO must take a central leadership role in addressing these threats or become irrelevant. By embarking on the course outlined here from his first days in office,

Secretary General-designate Stoltenberg can meet both NATO's growing external threats and its vexing internal issues with renewed vigor. In doing so, he can once more demonstrate the vital importance of the world's most successful alliance in the very different world of this century.

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