

Ties that Bind: Strategic Stability in the U.S.–China Relationship

Conviction is widespread and increasing in both the United States and China—as well as many other countries—that the U.S.–China relationship is becoming less stable and more dangerous.¹ We do not agree. Relations between Beijing and Washington in 2013 are more extensive, more varied, more interdependent, and more important to one another as well as to the global system than at any time in the past. But suspicion and mutual distrust persist and may have intensified. Yet, despite dramatic changes in the international system and the need to manage fleeting as well as persistent problems, the United States and China have maintained strategic stability for four decades. The relationship is less fragile and volatile than many assert, with strategic stability the result of multiple factors that reinforce one another and limit the deleterious effects of developments threatening specific “pillars” that undergird the relationship.² Complacency and failure to address misperceptions and mistrust, however, will have unfortunate consequences for both sides.

Sources of Strategic Stability

Strategic stability refers to the existence of conditions that make war between major powers unlikely. Mutual trust, shared values, and common objectives can enhance strategic stability, but the most important requisite is mutual conviction that using military force will result in unacceptable retaliatory damage.³ For example, strategic stability during the Cold War was assured primarily by the capacity to retaliate with

Thomas Fingar is the Oksenberg-Rohlen Distinguished Fellow at Stanford University's Institute for International Studies and former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC). Fan Jishe is a Senior Fellow in the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). They can be reached at tfingar@stanford.edu and fanjs@cass.org.cn.

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nuclear weapons, a situation many characterize as a “balance of terror,”⁴ a condition that does not require equal numbers or types of warheads or delivery systems.⁵ Yet, several other “pillars” exist to support contemporary strategic stability between the United States and China. The historically important “common enemy” pillar has been replaced by an increasing number of common interests. Other pillars include maintaining mutual vulnerability, and deepening economic and political interdependence—on each other and on the international system as a whole.

Relations between the United States and China became less hostile, and in that sense more stable, at approximately the same time that China began to deploy nuclear weapons in the late 1960s.⁶ China saw its ability to inflict unacceptable damage as the most important factor deterring a military attack by the United States, and as critical to preventing the United States from attempting to coerce the PRC through “nuclear blackmail.” By the time China had this capability, however, the United States had no intention of undertaking unprovoked military action against the People’s Republic, and vulnerability to assured destruction became less important to U.S. thinking about strategic stability than it was to Chinese thinking. (Mutual vulnerability did, however, change the behavior of the United States vis-à-vis China. Before China acquired the bomb, the United States had considered, and threatened, use of nuclear weapons against the People’s Republic. Although Chinese continue to speculate about possible U.S. attempts to use “nuclear blackmail,” Washington has not threatened China with nuclear weapons since China acquired the ability to retaliate.)⁷ This disparity persists and is at the heart of current Chinese concerns about strategic stability. Rather than seek “Mutual Assured Destruction,” Beijing has sought to create and maintain stability based on “Mutual Vulnerability.”⁸ However, in recent years the Chinese have begun to worry that U.S. missile defense efforts and greater reliance on advanced conventional weapons are intended to reduce the vulnerability of the United States to a point where China’s decades-long approach to strategic stability would no longer be viable.⁹

Mutual vulnerability to nuclear destruction is not the only pillar of strategic stability. The U.S.–China relationship has remained stable because the United States and China also, and increasingly, need one another to achieve priority objectives. Indeed, shared objectives have been important since the earliest days of rapprochement, when having a common enemy provided the rationale for limited cooperation in a “united front against Soviet hegemony.”¹⁰ In fact, the relationship between deterrence and détente appears more coincidental than causal. China’s first nuclear test occurred in 1964 and its first thermonuclear device was detonated in June 1967.¹¹ Richard Nixon signaled interest in improving relations with China later that same year, but did not mention nuclear weapons.¹² Neither did Henry Kissinger in his account of U.S. thinking in the run-up to his secret 1971 trip and Nixon’s own visit to China the following year.¹³ They focused, instead, on China’s increasingly strained relationship with the Soviet Union and resultant opportunities for the United States. We do not know whether, or how, the acquisition of nuclear weapons figured into Chairman Mao Zedong’s calculus. At the time, stability was based on the shared judgment that the Soviet threat would

endure and, secondarily, on China's slow acquisition of a more credible nuclear deterrent. These *realpolitik* considerations reduced the danger of direct conflict—a not insignificant achievement.

The scope and basis for the U.S.–China strategic relationship changed fundamentally in 1979, when the United States and China established formal diplomatic relations. By the middle of the previous year, Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders had put most of the building blocks in place for what became known as the “Reform and Opening Up Policy.”¹⁴ The Carter administration saw the change in China's strategy of development as an opportunity to strengthen a strategic partner and, possibly, transform relations with China by helping Beijing achieve its developmental goals.¹⁵ Deng's acceptance of Carter's offer to facilitate access to training, technology, markets, capital, and other benefits of participation in the U.S.–led “free world” system changed both China and the U.S.–China relationship in ways not fully anticipated by either side.

The success of Deng's policy of reform and opening up increased China's dependence on the system led and maintained by the United States. Continued success required continued access to markets, training, capital, and technology from the West. This, in turn, required maintaining stable and positive relations with the United States. China's disproportionate dependence on the West evolved into the third pillar of strategic stability: greater interdependence. (Interdependence is primarily economic but the United States and China increasingly must cooperate to achieve political and security objectives in the international arena.) This pillar constrains and creates opportunities for both sides, becoming the most important pillar of strategic stability. Each side would find it difficult to thrive without the other.¹⁶ In addition, the United States and China have instituted several dozen intergovernmental dialogue mechanisms—most notably the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED)—that help to manage and contain disagreements that could erode stability.

The last pillar of strategic stability to be created—interdependence—has become the most important.

U.S. and Chinese dependence on a peaceful international environment is a strong inducement to ensure that our relationship does not endanger global stability. When China and the United States were less interdependent and Beijing played a smaller role on the world stage, disputes had less impact on either country or on the global system. As China has become more active in all regions of the world—including the high seas, outer space, and cyberspace, where the United States has long been the dominant player—the United States and China encounter one another more frequently. More frequent contact increases the potential for disagreements and the need for mechanisms to resolve them. It also increases the danger that disagreements will affect the interests of other stakeholders.

Other nations on which China and the United States depend for resources, markets, political support, and other essentials recognize that contentious relations between the United States and the PRC jeopardize the interests of all nations that benefit from the international system. As a result, officials in Washington and Beijing

are under pressure from external as well as internal stakeholders. To protect and achieve their own interests, Chinese and U.S. leaders must be attentive to such pressure.

Strategic stability in U.S.–China relations has always been based on more than just mutual vulnerability to unacceptable damage from nuclear attack. A second pillar of stability, the existence of a common enemy, was once very important, but the demise of the Soviet Union did not erode strategic stability. Shared concerns about terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and other transnational threats now constitute the common enemy pillar. The development of mutually reinforcing economic and political interdependencies has become the third pillar that stabilizes the bilateral relationship. U.S. and Chinese dependence on a peaceful and stable international environment from which both countries have benefited so much in the past several decades is the most important pillar undergirding stability.

Developments that Challenge Strategic Stability

Arguing that the foundations of strategic stability are broad and deep is not meant to trivialize concerns about nuclear and conventional military developments that one or both sides find worrisome. Such concerns arise in the context of “strategic mistrust.”¹⁷ The existence of distrust traces to widespread Chinese suspicion—or conviction—that the United States is determined to surround China and constrain its “rise,” as well as to strong but less widely shared U.S. concerns about China’s communist government and its imputed determination to displace the United States as the leading world power. Mutual suspicion and distrust cannot be eliminated quickly or completely, but we think it imperative to address the concerns that are perceived to endanger strategic stability.

We judge the implications to be less dangerous than many predict, but agree that a number of developments could disrupt or derail the current trajectory. These challenges to stability must be addressed successfully to avoid unwanted consequences. Potential threats to strategic stability include realist fatalism, China’s military power, U.S. rebalancing, nuclear postures, and prudent hedging.

Realist Fatalism

The most serious threat to continued stability may be the conviction that China’s “rise” inevitably challenges U.S. preeminence and will spark a contest for supremacy.¹⁸ John Mearsheimer has characterized the propensity for conflict between rising and status quo nations as the tragedy of great power politics;¹⁹ a Chinese proverb reflects the same idea in its observation that “one mountain cannot be shared by two tigers.”

Conviction that conflict is inevitable shapes perceptions and behavior. For example, many Chinese reflexively interpret any action by the United States that could have negative implications for China as having been adopted specifically for that purpose. Bolstering alliances with the ROK and Japan in the wake of DPRK provocations, access arrangements in Central Asia to support troops in Afghanistan, and even improved relations with Myanmar are construed to prove that the United States seeks to encircle China in preparation for military conflict.²⁰ Similarly, U.S. academics, popular media, and politicians regularly assert that China’s military modernization and political activism have the real but unstated goal of challenging

U.S. preeminence.²¹ Leaders on both sides seem determined to prevent the situation from getting out of hand, but public opinion is difficult to manage, and at times appears to press governments to take actions more likely to increase than decrease strategic distrust and the potential for conflict.

We acknowledge the utility of realist theory for explaining the rise and fall of great powers in earlier eras, but assess that globalization, interdependence, and the explicit intention of both countries to avoid conflict have changed the nature of great power relationships.²² We also acknowledge that ours is a minority view and worry that widespread expectations that conflict is inevitable could lead to attitudes and actions that make it more likely. In other words, there is a significant danger that realist fatalism will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.²³

What role should mutual vulnerability play in a new type of great power relationship?

China's Military Power

China's military power is increasing.²⁴ Chinese commentators argue that the country needs a modern military to defend its vast territory, concentration of people as well as economic activity in coastal areas, and rapidly expanding commercial and other interests around the globe.²⁵ Chinese commentators also argue that the purpose is self-defense only, but many outside of China, including in the United States and in other parts of East Asia, worry that China's ambitions are more aggressive.²⁶

Realist fatalism contributes to the propensity to see military enhancements as instruments of a broader strategy to displace the United States from its dominant position in the region and in the world. This tendency is reinforced by explicit Chinese statements and easily inferred decisions indicating that force improvements target U.S. capabilities. Examples include the development of a ballistic missile capable of striking U.S. aircraft carriers, anti-satellite weapons, and advances in cyber warfare. Other nations see these developments and worry about China's ambitions, U.S. responses, and action/reaction dynamics.²⁷

Military expenditures also threaten strategic stability in other ways. For example, the United States and China justify military expenditures by naming the threats they are intended to counter. For both countries, the only "threat" that can justify their military budgets is the potential danger posed by the other. The United States responds to China's military enhancements because it would be irresponsible not to. Many Chinese see this as either an attempt to draw China into a costly arms race, of the kind that contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union, or as preparation for an "inevitable" attack to thwart China's rise.

U.S. Rebalancing

By almost any criterion (growth rates, trade flows, size of military forces, number of nuclear weapon states, size of populations, etc.), East Asia is the most dynamic and potentially dangerous region of the world. The United States has a very large stake in the region's continued peace, prosperity, and stability. It was heavily engaged in the

region before China began its economic rise and will remain deeply engaged irrespective of China's growing capabilities and importance. Indeed, China's rise and China-U.S. interdependence have increased the U.S. stake in the region. Though somewhat clumsily announced as a "return" to a region the United States had never left and as a "pivot" originally explained primarily in terms of military deployments, it should surprise no one that the United States intends to remain a major player in the region—even as the end of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as budgetary pressures make it possible, and necessary, to cut back in other regions.²⁸

Some interpretations of U.S. rebalancing in Asia are the mirror image of views of China's military buildup.

In some respects, interpretations of U.S. rebalancing in Asia are the mirror image of the way many see China's military buildup. China is often depicted as having started a chain of potentially destabilizing actions and the United States as responding with countermoves that threaten regional stability. The lens of realist fatalism magnifies the perils of such perceptions. Our objective here is not to assign relative blame or excuse the actions of either side. Rather, it is to note with concern that pessimistic interpretations of specific actions by both sides feed preconceptions and corrode all pillars of strategic stability.

Nuclear Postures

Changes in the nuclear postures of the United States and China also threaten strategic stability. U.S. changes are part of a suite of moves to decrease the number of nuclear weapons in U.S. and other arsenals, and to reduce even further the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense planning. One way to increase the survivability of a smaller number of nuclear weapons is to develop effective defenses against ballistic missiles. The Chinese understand this but worry that missile defense could reduce the vulnerability of U.S. strategic systems and thus degrade China's nuclear deterrent. Stated another way, China sees U.S. missile defense as destabilizing because it undercuts mutual vulnerability.²⁹

Chinese geostrategic thinkers also worry about U.S. efforts to develop advanced conventional munitions with the precision and killing power to destroy key elements of China's nuclear deterrent without using nuclear weapons. Countermoves to address these concerns could include increasing the number of nuclear weapons and delivery systems to restore stability at higher numbers, an outcome detrimental to the interests of both countries.

Americans worry about changes in China's nuclear posture as well, specifically the co-location of nuclear and conventionally armed versions of the same missiles. With no agreed alternative to using counting rules developed during the Cold War, the United States (and others) must assume that any missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead is a nuclear weapon, especially one launched from a base for nuclear and conventionally armed versions of the same missile.³⁰ That is a dangerous situation, especially given the absence of meaningful dialogue about nuclear weapons.

Prudent Hedging

Both sides appear sincere in calling for developing a new type of relationship between or among major powers—a relationship that can avoid the trajectories predicted by realist fatalism. But each would be irresponsible to ignore the possibility that best efforts might prove inadequate and clashes might become unavoidable. The aphorism “hope for the best but prepare for the worst” is applicable here, and both sides do what they consider prudent to prepare for unwanted possibilities. The United States conducts close-in surveillance that China regards as unfriendly, if not hostile. China develops capabilities to disrupt U.S. use of space and cyberspace in the event of confrontation. Each observes what the other is doing and both worry that hedging behavior might actually be preparation for war.

This worry is natural and to a degree unavoidable. But in the context of mutual distrust and widespread fatalism about the inevitability of conflict between rising and dominant powers, there is real danger that prudent hedging will reduce stability. As with the other threats to strategic stability, merely hoping that they will not undermine the pillars of stability is not an acceptable course of action.

In the context of mutual distrust, there is real danger that prudent hedging will reduce stability.

Preserving and Enhancing Strategic Stability

The exaggerated potential of specific disagreements to destabilize the overall relationship gives many of them a political salience that sometimes makes reaching a solution more difficult. When issues are cast as matters of principle or depicted as worse and more consequential than they are, discrete problems become litmus test issues on which it is difficult to compromise. Stakeholders and pundits also tend to exaggerate the severity of disagreements in order to ensure that issues receive the attention necessary to defuse them.³¹ Chinese and U.S. officials understand this.³²

However, the U.S.–China relationship is too important to each nation and to the global system to assume that forces leading to greater interdependence will automatically trump those forces with the potential to damage strategic stability. Allowing the relationship to drift because of misplaced confidence that trends are headed in a positive direction could undermine regional and global stability and increase the risk of costly conflict between major powers.

What can or should be done to preserve and enhance strategic stability? The examples that follow illustrate possibilities for each pillar.

Common Challenges

For a long time, the primary pillar of the U.S.–China strategic relationship was shared concern about a common adversary, the Soviet Union. That basis for the relationship no longer exists and there is no plausible replacement. Disappearance of a strong common adversary has reduced U.S. incentives to enhance China’s military capabilities and increased both U.S. and Chinese concern about the military capabilities and intentions

of each other. The resultant propensity to view one another as potential adversaries, rather than *de facto* allies, fuels worst-case assessments, mutual suspicion, and incentives to hedge against unwanted contingencies. Seeking a successor enemy to replace the Soviet Union as a pillar of U.S.–China strategic stability is neither desirable nor feasible. No country, group of countries, or non-state actor has the ability or ambition to pose an existential threat to the current world order, and it would be feckless to pretend otherwise.

China and the United States do not have a common enemy, but they do have many common interests and challenges. Examples include international terrorism, proliferation of nuclear weapons and other dangerous technologies, failing states, consequences of climate change, and other threats to growth and prosperity. Such challenges are less compelling than the threat of Soviet hegemony, and therefore more difficult to “sell” to publics, politicians, and vested interests skeptical about cooperation with the “rising” or “hegemonic” power. But the challenges are serious and cannot be solved by Washington or Beijing acting alone. They sometimes cannot even be managed effectively without U.S.–China cooperation.³³

The proliferation and complexity of non-traditional security challenges requiring cooperative responses by the United States and China create numerous opportunities for dialogue, coordinated policies, and joint leadership.³⁴ Working together on such problems will require overcoming disagreements about causation, consequences, relative priorities, and optimal solutions, but the net result is likely to be enhanced understanding, more common goals, and greater strategic stability.

Using transnational challenges as a substitute for a common enemy could strengthen the bilateral relationship, but that alone would not address concerns about each other’s military capabilities and intentions. To reduce risks of misperception, miscalculation, and countermoves which undermine trust and stability requires frank and frequent government-to-government dialogues to address questions of the “What are you doing and why are you doing it?” variety. As noted above, both sides have specific concerns that can and should be addressed.

Mutual Vulnerability

One of the most important asymmetries in the U.S.–China relationship is the varying importance each ascribes to nuclear weapons, both their own and those of the other side. For example, China considers its ability to use nuclear weapons to inflict unacceptable damage on the United States as essential to its ability to deter Washington from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China. Actions by the United States to reduce its vulnerability to nuclear attack, such as defense against ballistic missiles, is interpreted as intended to degrade China’s deterrent and, in the view of some, to provoke China to undertake an expensive nuclear arms race.³⁵

The United States, in turn, argues that it has not threatened to use nuclear weapons against China since the Eisenhower administration—more than a decade before the start of U.S.–China rapprochement. It also states it has no intention to attack or invade China with nuclear or any other weapons. Nevertheless, Chinese tend to regard their own retaliatory capability as necessary to deter an active threat from the United States. Americans, in contrast, tend to view nuclear weapons as part of a hedging

strategy against the low probability of a Chinese nuclear attack on the United States, its allies, or its partners.³⁶

Advanced conventional weapons are another source of concern reflecting different perceptions. Americans view advanced conventional capabilities as a way to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and thus the likelihood that they would be used. China tends to see them as a way to threaten China's nuclear facilities without crossing the nuclear threshold. Conversely, China's efforts to develop its blue water naval capabilities and to threaten U.S. naval forces with ballistic missiles are designed, at least in part, to deter potential U.S. military actions by increasing the vulnerability of U.S. forces to Chinese conventional weapons.

This overly simplified summary of the issues involved ignores many nuances and assumptions, but it does illustrate the nature and significance of perceptual differences and the need for serious dialogue to forestall more serious misperceptions and more destabilizing actions. Concerns about threats to mutual vulnerability arise primarily because of mutual suspicion and/or conviction of hostile intent. The core issue is not whether specific actions threaten the mutual vulnerability pillar of strategic stability, but whether the United States and China can avoid the realist fatalist "tragedy of major powers." Establishing the new type of relationship that both sides claim to want is the overriding challenge. What role mutual vulnerability should play in that relationship is unclear, but must be addressed as part of the search for enduring stability.

In two recent reports, the 2010 *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report* and the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, the United States indicated that it seeks dialogue on strategic stability and that "maintaining strategic stability in the U.S.–China relationship is as important to the Administration as maintaining strategic stability with other major powers."³⁷ This could serve as the starting point for addressing challenges to strategic stability.

Another way to tackle both common enemy and mutual vulnerability concerns would be to address them in the context of negotiations to forge a new security architecture for East Asia. The goal is fairly obvious, namely to devise arrangements that are inclusive and protect the interests of all parties. This is easier to state than to achieve. One difficulty is the need to devise collective security arrangements which embody extended deterrence but do not run afoul of Chinese contentions that extended deterrence is incompatible with commitment to a "No First Use" policy of nuclear weapons. Other difficulties—where room exists for cooperation—include developing mechanisms that recognize the vulnerability of both to potential actions in outer space and cyber space.

Economic and Political Interdependence

Although we have argued that economic and political interdependence now constitutes the strongest pillar of strategic stability, we recognize that developments in this arena also fuel concerns about instability. One reason is that interdependence yields mixed results, with people disagreeing over which should be classified as positive or negative. They also assign different weights to specific consequences and favor or oppose measures contributing to interdependence on the basis of their own hierarchies of value. Thus, for example, those who accord higher priority to economic growth, prosperity, and performance-based legitimacy tend to be more willing to accept the constraints of

interdependence than are those, for example, who attach higher value to maintaining particular features of China's system.

Developments in interdependence also fuel concerns about instability.

The magnitude and trajectory of interdependence affect—and are affected by—the nature of the U.S.–China relationship. Greater interdependence increases incentives for China and the United States to resolve disputes that threaten mutually beneficial arrangements, including those contributing to bilateral, regional, and global stability. These incentives are reinforced by pressure from other nations benefiting from globalization and

manifestations of strategic stability, which would be put at risk by deteriorating China–U.S. relations.

Interdependence also constrains the ability of the United States or China to pursue its own national interests. Some in China see this as giving the United States the ability to constrain China's rise in order to maintain U.S. preeminence. Conversely, some in the United States see interdependence as foolishly or dangerously weakening the ability of the United States to preserve its dominant position in the international system.

The existence of such consequences makes it challenging to reinforce strategic stability by expanding and deepening interdependence. To the extent that interdependence is an unintended consequence of globalization, it will expand or contract in response to changes in the global economy, technological advances, government policies, and myriad decisions based primarily on criteria other than their potential impact on U.S.–China relations.

We judge that, on balance, interdependence contributes to strategic stability. Thus, we generally favor approaches and measures to manage its consequences over those intended to limit interdependence. At the global level, we prefer measures to maintain and improve the existing world economic and political order that evolved out of the free world system put in place after World War II. This is not a call to preserve the status quo, because what worked in the past and what has brought unprecedented prosperity to more people and places than any previous system will not be adequate to now manage the new world it helped to create. As the two largest economies, China and the United States have special incentives and obligations to preserve what is good, and reform or replace what is no longer appropriate.

A Legacy of Shared Lessons and Experience

The strategic relationship between China and the United States has remained remarkably stable for more than four decades despite the end of the Cold War, dramatic changes and five leadership transitions in China, eight changes of administration in the United States, and fundamental transformation of the international system. During that time, the declaratory policies of both countries have remained essentially the same, both with respect to one another and toward international relationships in general. Changes in both countries, most notably those in China, have made us more alike. The process of convergence continues. Neither will

ever become just like the other, but similarities, compatibilities, and mutual understanding will continue to increase absent an unexpected shock to the relationship. Trend lines are moving in the direction of greater stability.

Both sides have learned to address issues and resolve problems. Not all of them, but more than enough to acquire a reservoir of experience and larger stake in the relationship. The issues that have been resolved, at least temporarily, have involved increasingly central or fundamental matters. Examples include de-linking trade and human rights issues in the 1990s and the decreasing importance of ideological differences. Moreover, the relationship has become more stable despite failure to completely resolve a number of issues important to one or both sides, including U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and human rights.

To say that protests and public statements regarding any of these issues have become *pro forma* declarations of principle would be highly inaccurate. But both sides have learned to manage their disagreements. Moreover, both recognize that “managing” issues is not making them worse. Cross-Strait relations are deeper and better than ever, and the danger of a military confrontation between China and the United States triggered by developments involving Taiwan is far less than it was even a few years ago. Much the same can be said about progress on human rights in China.

Many in both countries are unhappy about the failure to completely resolve what they regard as fundamental issues of principle or “core interests,” but both governments recognize that some problems that are too difficult to be solved right now may become easier in the future. Both sides have learned to avoid making questions on which they disagree into litmus tests for the overall relationship, and to refrain from casting issues as “matters of principle” on which they cannot be seen to compromise. In short, both the United States and China have learned how to manage issues and to manage the relationship in ways that isolate and limit the impact of disagreements, sustain momentum, and strengthen strategic stability.

Notes

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 30. See John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, "Making China's Nuclear War Plan," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 68, no. 5 (September-October 2012), pp. 45-65.
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