

China's Partnership Discourse with Africa¹.

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We believe that thanks to the concerted efforts of and cooperation between both sides, the Beijing summit will certainly become a grand and pragmatic event; and that the China-Africa Cooperation Forum -- a great ship³ carrying China-Africa relations in the new century -- will surely sail toward a bright future of China-Africa friendship! (Beijing Summit, Section 7, 2006)⁴

At the time of the largest ever summit meeting between China and Africa,⁵ it may be valuable to review what President Hu Jintao has termed 'A New Type of China-Africa Strategic Partnership' (Hu, 2006, in King, 2006b). Rather than examine all aspects of China's partnership discourse, we shall focus particularly on the development cooperation dimension of this wider relationship, and look especially at China's characterisation of its development assistance with Africa. This is principally because there has, thus far, been little written about China's aid relationships with Africa, in comparison to trade and investment.

The paper analyses the policy discourse rather than the actual results of the policies, as exemplified in projects, programmes or other initiatives in African countries. But even without an examination of these policies-in-practice at the country level, there are still some significant developments to be noted in the evolution of China's partnership discourse.

We shall focus principally on China's conceptualisation of its engagement with Africa, and, in passing, note the New Partnership for Africa's Development's (NEPAD) own

¹ A first draft of this paper was presented at the conference on 'China in Africa in the 21st century: Preparing for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation' organised by the Royal African Society, the South African Institute of International Affairs, and the Secretariat of NEPAD (the New Partnership for Africa's Development), 16-17 October 2006, Muldersdrift, near Johannesburg.

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³ The mention of the Great Ship may remind some readers, with a sense of history, that it is just over 600 years since Admiral Zheng He led a series of enormous expeditions from China to the East and South East coasts of Africa. See *Sailing West: Admiral Zheng He's voyages*, March-May 2006, Hong Kong Museum of History.

⁴ 'China-Africa relations board the ship of a new century' is made up of seven separate weblinks in sequence. These will be referred to as different sections and their web reference will be given.

⁵ More than 30 African Heads of State were confirmed by mid-September, and the number has continued to rise.

approach to development cooperation with China. We shall also, where appropriate, contrast China's approach to Africa with Western positions on development cooperation with the continent.

In analysing the character of China's partnership with Africa, we examine China's intensely bilateral approach to development, and, within that, the role of its approach to aid. We suggest that the attempt to identify the specifically aid element in China's overall bilateral strategy towards particular African countries may prove to be somewhat artificial. It may end up with a focus that does not capture the holistic nature of the bilateralism that China has been developing, and which is very evident in the *Beijing Action Plan* that emerged from the November 3-5, 2006 China-Africa Summit (FOCAC, 2006).

China's development cooperation with Africa

We have argued elsewhere (King, 2006b) that China much prefers the language of mutually beneficial economic cooperation to that of 'aid' or development assistance. Nevertheless, it does have a 'Department of Foreign Aid' within the Ministry of Commerce, and each year the *China Commerce Yearbook* (CCY) contains a very brief report from the Director General of this Department on 'China's Aid to Foreign Countries' (CCY, 2005). By contrast, the Department of Foreign Economic Cooperation is concerned both with inward investment to China and with the role of China's foreign direct investment overseas, especially engineering contracts, and with the role of China's 'labour cooperation'.⁶ Overall, the almost 1000-page annual volume from the Ministry of Commerce has very little that is explicitly on aid or what in OECD countries would be termed official development assistance (ODA).⁷

Thus, there are just two short paragraphs which are specifically about 'Aid to African Countries', but those are, significantly, embedded in a report on 'Economic and Trade Relations between China and African countries'. And this report is just one of a series of 14 reports on these same Economic and Trade Relations between China and different world regions or major countries, including Canada, Europe, USA, Japan, the EU etc. etc. In other words, the language specifically about aid is a very tiny element in a much more pervasive discourse about economic and trade cooperation and exchange.

However, when China does pronounce about development cooperation, it avoids the language of donor and recipient. Instead, the discourse has a strong emphasis on solidarity, deriving from a claim about China and Africa's shared 'developing country' status, and it is weathered by several decades of working together. The following, taken from the earlier Beijing Declaration of 2000, produced by the first ministerial meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, typically affirms China's preference for the language of South-South cooperation and symmetry:

⁶ The role of China's contract labour in overseas projects is very large, with a total of no less than 535,000 Chinese labourers in various projects in 2004 (CCY, 2005: 108).

⁷ The Annual Report on 'China's Aid to Foreign Countries' is just over 3 pages of these 1000.

We also emphasise that China and African countries are developing countries with common fundamental interests; and believe that close consultation between the two sides on international affairs is of great importance to consolidating the solidarity among developing countries and facilitating the establishment of a new international order. (China, People's Republic of, 2000: 2)

This is not to say that the annual report on 'China's aid to foreign countries in 2004' does not refer to some of the elements of ODA. The report does mention humanitarian assistance. But when China does comment on this element, as a 'developing country' which frequently is also affected by natural disasters, it emphasises its deep sympathy whenever other friendly countries are so affected. It does also talk about fulfilling its 'international commitments'; but, again, as a country that is still 'striving to achieve comprehensive and sustainable development in its own national economy, it provides its 'utmost assistance'... 'in the spirit of equality and mutual benefit'. It also refers to its attempts to improve the quality of its aid, and of its aid management. Indeed, there are several paragraphs of the most recent short report on foreign aid which talk of how the 'Chinese Government has enhanced its lawful management of aid to foreign countries and made considerable achievements in the process of its system development' (Wang, 2005: 112).

China also uses the well-worn language of human resource and capacity development in its annual reports on aid to foreign countries; but it consistently represents this increasingly substantial training activity with Africa, not as something given by a donor to a recipient but as an activity that has 'escalated personnel and technology exchange and improved mutual understanding and friendship' (Wang, 2005: 111). In other words, even when using the language of aid, it seems to be searching for ways to present this as part of a wider framework of exchange and cooperation.

This language of mutuality, common economic benefit and of exchange between partners runs right through China's discourse about development and has done for a long time. It has been reinforced for several years in the representation of individual partner countries on the website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see King 2006b for more illustration). In considerable detail, the Foreign Affairs' website documents, in its African country profiles, the intensity of exchange and cooperation, whether economic, cultural, social, educational, or military.

This language is probably felt by many African countries to be an attractive alternative to the West's perspective on Africa. Several Western development agencies represent individual African countries, on agency websites, in terms of their poverty, or on how they measure up (or more often don't) to the Millennium Development Goals.⁸ By

⁸ For example on the DFID website: 'Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. 80% of the population of 77 million, lives on less than \$2 a day' or, in the case of Kenya 'Kenya is **one of the poorest countries in Africa** with more than 55% of the population living below the poverty line' (emphasis in the original) [www.dfid.gov.uk/countries].

contrast, China represents all the 48 countries which have been invited to the November 2006 Beijing Summit in terms that do not refer to their poverty at all. It should also be noted, in contrast to Western agencies, which have selective engagement with Africa, e.g. with Francophone, Anglophone, or specific 'programme countries', China embraces partnership with all African countries, except for the handful which maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

First, on the Beijing Summit website for November 2006, the length of their formal bilateral relationship is noted for each country right down to the exact day on which this commenced, for instance May 30th 1956 for Egypt, November 26th, 1964 for Tanzania, and January 1st 1998 for South Africa. There is then some comment on the character of the two countries' strategic partnership, and an illustration of how this has been intensified at the highest political level through visits of heads of states in both directions. For almost 20 African countries, their country profile also notes that they have become a destination for Chinese tourists, which again suggests an interest in what Africa has to offer – rather than to receive. Then there is given the total of bilateral trade between these Members of the Beijing Summit and China. Nor is this only given for the large countries like South Africa, with its US\$7.27 billion in 2005, or oil-rich like Angola with its US\$6.95 billion in the same year, but even for the very much smaller Burundi with its US\$12.22 million of trade in 2005. It is probably rather important to Burundi that China should bother to say on the Beijing Summit website: 'The two countries respect each other politically and treat each other on an equal footing, work in close cooperation in international affairs, and have carried out fruitful cooperation in such areas as trade and economic and social development' (Beijing Summit, profiles, 2006).⁹

Each of these 48 countries invited to the Beijing Summit merits separate treatment on the conference website, however small their trade with China. This constitutes an impressive attention to detail for what are some very small players in global terms. It should be recalled, in this connection, that the total of China's two-way trade with Africa, though it has quadrupled since 2001 (Davis, 2006), and reached almost US\$40 billion in 2005, is still a little less than a third of the US\$115 billion that is the expected amount of China's bilateral trade with just one country, South Korea, in 2006 (Jiang, 2006).

In this positive approach to Africa, the Beijing Summit confirms the stance taken by *China's African Policy* which was launched in January 2006.¹⁰ Unlike many Western

⁹ In a similar gesture to Rwanda, a relatively insignificant trading partner, the main English language newspaper, *China Daily*, under the banner of the 3rd China-Africa Cooperation Forum, provided a whole 4 page supplement on 'Sino-Rwanda Friendship', giving the Rwandan President and his leading ministers the opportunity to extol their country and its 'burgeoning relationship' with China (*China Daily*, 13.10.06).

¹⁰ It also closely confirms the position taken more than 40 years earlier when Zhou Enlai laid down the 'Eight principles governing foreign aid' during this visits to Ghana and Mali in the early 1960s (See King 2006a), as well as Jiang Zemin's five point proposal, outlined in his Africa visit of May 1996 (Le Pere & Shelton, 2006: 37).

agencies for which, as we have noted, poverty reduction and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers are key lenses for viewing African states, *China's African Policy* does not use the term 'poverty reduction' or 'the poor' at all. By contrast, 'common prosperity' occurs several times. The emphasis is on the whole range of the current and planned cooperation between African countries and China, but especially political, economic, educational and health cooperation. There is very little explicit aid discourse in the *African Policy*. There is just the following, single sentence: 'In light of its own financial capacity and economic situation, China will do its best to provide and gradually increase assistance to African nations with no political strings attached' (China, 2006: 4).

But the fundamental reason that the language of poverty reduction and of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with their time-bound targets does not feature very much at all in China's partnership discourse is that China's approach to development cooperation is intensely bilateral. The 'Overview of China's aid to foreign countries' is made up a series of country-to-country agreements:

In 2004, Chinese Government concluded 266 aid agreements with 104 countries and international organisations, and developed fruitful economic and technical cooperation with them in various fields.... Another 54 sets of projects were undertaken in 38 countries.... In addition, 172 training courses for administrative officials and technicians were conducted for 4355 trainees from 135 countries (Wang, 2005: 110).

This strong bilateral core to China's development cooperation is reinforced by the President and the Premier's 2006 Africa trips which concluded a whole series of bilateral agreements with individual African countries. The four pillars of these visits are the same as are reflected in the country profiles on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website: high level political exchange; all forms of economic and trade cooperation; exchanges and cooperation in the fields of health, culture, education and tourism; and, lastly, cooperation in the area of national security.¹¹ This pattern for thinking about bilateral cooperation in these several spheres is nowhere captured more effectively than in President Hu Jintao's speech entitled 'Work Together to Forge a New Type of China-Africa Strategic Partnership', which was delivered on the 27th April 2006 to a joint session of the two chambers of Nigeria's National Assembly. Despite its call for a new type of relationship, President Hu's proposal covered almost the same areas that have been traditional to the form of China's bilateralism represented on the web of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is also worth remarking that the President made no reference in this key speech to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is a multilateral programme of the African Union; rather the key Strategic Partnership was bilateral.

¹¹ See Wen Jiabao's visit to Ghana in June 2006 for just such a listing: fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/wshd/t259101.htm

We shall return very briefly to China's approach to NEPAD in a moment, in the context of China's multilateral engagement with Africa, but a little more needs to be said about this bilateral perspective on international development. For instance, in the reporting on completed and newly undertaken projects by the Ministry of Commerce worldwide, the lens is country-to-country. Thus, of the completed projects in 2004 almost half of the 44 were in Africa; of those newly undertaken in 2004, 37 of the 72 were in Africa, and of the technical cooperation projects, half of the 60 were in Africa (CCY, 2005: 964-7). It is easy to see from the *China Commerce Yearbook* with which individual countries these projects were agreed.

The level of detail on what has been built or provided is listed by country, not globally. Thus it can be seen that Niger has received a complete 'tractor assembling line', that Ghana has had 'barracks of soldiers and police', or that Uganda has been provided with an 'office building for Ministry of Foreign Affairs'. A selection from this record of completed projects or projects newly committed makes up much of the brief annual report on 'China's aid to foreign countries' (CCY, 2005: 110). But nowhere is the value of these items listed; so there is no way currently of knowing, for instance, how the cost of the tractor assembly line in Niger compares to the 'capital road project' in Madagascar, or how an 'Art Centre' in Djibouti might compare to providing a 'conference auditorium' in Rwanda. Nor is there any indication of the scale of what look like a set of very disparate projects covering many different sectors.

It is surprising that the value of these aided projects, along with the value of the training & scholarships, and concessional loans, is not yet given in the annual *China Commerce Yearbook*, when there is so much detail on everything else. For instance, the exact number of projects and the dollar value of them in the sphere of 'foreign contracted project and labour service cooperation' are provided for individual countries and regions. This makes it possible to see that in 2004, the continent of Africa had no less than 3,116 such contracts, and, again, these projects are broken down by country, so that, interestingly, it can be seen that tiny Gambia (which does not have diplomatic relations with China) had 590 such contracts, and Guinea had 886. However, the value of the projects is also supplied; which makes it possible to see that 29 such projects in South Africa come to a value of twice the 590 projects in the Gambia, or that 128 projects in Sudan come to a value of 30 times the 886 projects in Guinea.

Doubtless, it is only a matter of time before the value of the development assistance projects will also be given in the Annual Report of the Ministry of Commerce.¹² Indeed, the Premier, Wen Jiabao, in a quite unprecedented comment, actually mentioned the scale of China's assistance to Africa in June 2006.¹³ Nevertheless, there is still a measure of official sensitivity to declaring the dollar values of grant aid and soft loans

¹² An indication that times are changing is that Premier Wen Jiabao mentioned, for the first time, during his visit to South Africa in 2006, that China's aid to Africa had totalled 44.4 billion Yuan (US\$5,61698 billion) over the last 50 years (http://english.people.com.cn/200606/23/eng20060623_276714.html)

¹³ It is also quite remarkable that the figure announced should actually total 444; these are very unpropitious numbers in China,.

to developing countries, given that there are, according to World Bank estimates, some 100 million Chinese living on less than a dollar a day, and almost 500 million on less than US\$2 a day (DFID, 2006). Another reason why the rather motley collection of aid projects admitted to in the *China Commerce Yearbook* may not be given a dollar value is that these projects on their own do not really add up to a holistic development strategy; nor do they capture the totality of China's bilateralism. The aid projects need to be seen in the context of the other elements in China's engagement with individual countries; thus, it could be argued that the infrastructure and construction projects with which China is involved in so many countries of Africa should be seen as inseparable from the grant aid projects. Without the investment in agriculture or in transportation infrastructure, the specific projects in health and education may well not be sustainable.

Arguably, therefore, the whole set of agreements with a particular country constitute this holistic bilateralism. Some of these are, strictly speaking, ODA, such as the scholarships, humanitarian aid, medical assistance, the concessional loans, debt cancellation, or preferential access to China for specified goods; but others, such as being declared one of the African countries that is a declared tourist destination for China, or being the site of labour service cooperation, or joint-ventures in agriculture, water development or construction may not comply with definitions of ODA, but are perhaps justifiably seen by China as crucial elements in its overall engagement with a country.

Good examples of this can be examined in the series of detailed sketches of aid, trade and investment by China in Africa's construction and infrastructure sectors (Centre for Chinese Studies, 2006). These focus on Angola, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Zambia but they illustrate an extraordinarily wide-ranging set of investments, some of which are termed 'aid', and some 'trade and investment'. But the totality of China's presence in these four countries, or indeed in many others such as Ethiopia, Egypt, Nigeria, or South Africa,¹⁴ is very different from the collection of so-called 'aid' projects captured in the *China Commerce Yearbook*. They point to a China that is prepared to risk investing in a whole swathe of major infrastructural projects in Africa at a time when few if any western investors are ready to do so.¹⁵

What would be fascinating to analyse in further detail is the extent to which China does in fact have something approaching an explicit 'country strategy' in many of these African states. There may not be a 'country assistance strategy' like DFID, or other bilateral agencies, but in China's coverage of infrastructure, trade, investment, agriculture, not to mention health and education, culture and tourism, these comprehensive investments may be a good example of what the Commission for Africa (2005) judged to be essential in many African countries, if growth is to be stimulated, encouraged and sustained.

¹⁴ Presentations by foreign affairs/embassy staff at RAS/SAIIA/NEPAD (2006).

¹⁵ For instance, the report on Sierra Leone notes: 'The country is in desperate need of investment and to date China is the only country to demonstrate any serious interest' (China Studies Centre, 2006: 34-5)

In this connection, it would be surprising if China, in its thinking about poverty reduction and growth in Africa, had not borrowed something from its own experience of generating development in its western provinces. Its 'Development-Oriented Poverty Reduction Programme' gives a flavour of China's internal development strategy. It is interesting to note their use of the words, 'holistic' and 'comprehensive':

First, stick to the comprehensive exploitation and all-round development. As cause for poverty is complicated (sic), so are the holistic measures for alleviating poverty. We must include the development-oriented poverty alleviation in the national economic and social plan so that we can have a favourable external condition for the task. We must intensify our effort to build water conservancy, transportation, electricity, and communication infrastructures in order to contribute to the development of the poor areas and the poverty alleviation and a better life. It is necessary for the poor areas not only to develop production, increase farmers' incomes, but also pay attention to the development of science and technology, education, health care and culture, improve the community environment, raise the quality of life and propel a harmonious development and all round progress. Only in doing so, can we eradicate the poverty at its root. (LGOP, 2003: 98-9)

It is too early to say whether, and if so to what extent, China has in fact been influenced by its own history of development in approaching the challenge of development in Africa. If so, it would constitute a new and very different perspective from much commentary that sees China's aid projects as merely a series of irresponsible 'sweeteners' for concluding lucrative energy and other natural resource deals.¹⁶ By contrast, it has been commonplace in Japan for several decades to draw on its own history of development experience, in the Meiji Restoration and after the second world war, in thinking about its philosophy of external aid (King and McGrath

China, multilateralism and NEPAD

Compared to the intensity of these bilateral relations, China has just begun to make a number of voluntary contributions to multilateral agencies, such as the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Fund and to the Asian Development Bank, and it has reportedly joined donor coordination groups in Kenya and Tanzania (Davis, 2006). There is a good deal of interest in OECD aid circles in getting China to be much more of a multilateral player.

In this connection, it has also begun to engage with NEPAD. For example, in the Action Plan emerging from the Second China-Africa Cooperation Forum in Ethiopia in December 2003, there were some warm words about the importance of the international community providing support and assistance to Africa, 'in accordance

¹⁶ See for example Mbaye (2006) who argues that mainland China has three objectives in relation to Africa: 'to consolidate secure energy and mineral supplies; to curtail Taiwan's influence on the continent...; and to augment Beijing's burgeoning authority.' Or see 'Wolfowitz slams China over African loan policies' SCMP October 25, 2006.

with the priorities outlined in NEPAD document (sic)' (FOCAC, 2003: 4). But the bulk of the communiqué was framed much more in terms of the series of bilateral actions China and African countries had been taking in all the different spheres of economic and social development.

Similarly, in *China's African Policy* there are positive comments about NEPAD's having drawn up an 'encouraging picture of African rejuvenation and development', and about the need to find the best way of furthering cooperation between the Forum and NEPAD; but the bulk of the African Policy document follows the four pillars of China's traditional bilateral cooperation, at the political, economic, social and security levels. It is worth noting that 'multilateral cooperation' is a short paragraph within the ten sub-themes of the economic field.

As far as the November 2006 Beijing Summit is concerned, there are just three paragraphs about NEPAD on the main background document on the Summit website. Again, these say clearly that 'China attaches importance to and supports NEPAD' (Beijing Summit, Section 6). However, it goes on to explain its support in language that would suggest that its traditional bilateral support to countries on sectors which happen also to be linked to NEPAD's agenda can actually be taken to mean support to NEPAD:

It has cooperated with African countries within the framework of the Forum through bilateral channels in education, agriculture, human resource development infrastructure construction, and prevention and treatment of infectious diseases and other priority areas set by NEPAD. As a result, cooperation has turned out to be successful. (Beijing Summit, section 6, 2006)

If this interpretation is correct, then this is really a continuation of China's traditional bilateral cooperation rather than support to NEPAD *per se*. On the other hand, the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, did specifically promise the NEPAD leadership, during his visit to South Africa in June 2006, that China would aid NEPAD's nurses and midwives training programmes in Tanzania and Kenya. Beyond this, there was signed in July 2006, during a NEPAD secretariat visit to China, a 'Memorandum on enhancing consultations and cooperation between the secretariat of China's follow up Committee of FOCAC¹⁷ and secretariat of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)'. Intriguingly, this short statement on NEPAD concluded by assuming that this Memorandum would lay 'a solid foundation **for the furthering of bilateral cooperation**' (Beijing Summit, Section 6, 2006, emphasis added).

Finally, the near-to-final draft of the *Beijing Action Plan (2006-2009)* from the November 2006 FOCAC Summit follows a similar pattern. There is a short, supportive section on 'Cooperation between China and the African Union as well as the sub-regional organisations in Africa', and within this there is just a single sentence on NEPAD, resolving to 'strengthen this cooperation and further explore specific ways and areas of cooperation' (FOCAC, 2006, para. 2.5.4). By contrast the bulk of the

¹⁷ Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

draft document covers the regular pattern of cooperation at the political, economic, and social levels which has traditionally been delivered bilaterally. It is important to emphasise the point that although the document constantly repeats the phrase ‘the two sides noted’ (or ‘agreed’, ‘welcomed’, ‘reaffirmed’, ‘recognised’, ‘decided’ etc etc.), the modality of agreement is typically bilateral. For instance, in the very important area of investment and business cooperation:

The two sides noted with satisfaction the steady increase of mutual investment in growing areas since the Second Ministerial Conference of FOCAC in 2003, as this will enhance bilateral economic ties and contribute to local economic development....

The two sides decided to facilitate the negotiation, conclusion and implementation of the *Agreement on Bilateral Facilitation and Protection of Investment* and the *Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation* to create a favourable environment for investment cooperation and protect the lawful rights and interests of investors from both sides. (FOCAC, 2006: para 3.2)

Given what we have claimed about the character of this Beijing Summit, it may be anticipated that the way that African representatives in Beijing and in Africa have negotiated on the Beijing draft may itself reflect an important dimension of the evolving pattern of China-Africa cooperation. Our preliminary understanding of this process is that key individual African country representatives, acting in concert, have certainly been more influential than either the African Union or NEPAD.

We doubt very much, therefore that the final draft of the Beijing Summit will feel at all like the G8 Summit of Gleneagles in Scotland in 2005 where there was enormous pressure to generate a pledge about doubling aid to Africa. A victory of sorts was declared on this pledge, but of course it was always seen as being extremely difficult to monitor, even at the level of the individual G8 country.

By contrast, the *Beijing Action Plan* looks like being rather concrete, and easy to monitor. Unlike the G8 (donor) emphasis embodied in doubling aid to Africa, by far the commonest phrase in the Action Plan is ‘The two sides’, which emphasises the desire for symmetry that China and Africa claim to be at the heart of their interaction. This is captured in the final paragraph of the Beijing Summit background document, and doubtless the final Beijing Declaration will use similar language:

At the summit Chinese and African leaders will have an opportunity to jointly review the history of China-Africa friendship and cooperation, and discuss how to establish and develop in the new situation a new strategic Sino-African partnership featuring equality and mutual benefit politically, win-win and cooperation economically and exchanges and drawing on by each other culturally, in order to jointly map out a blueprint for the future development of China-Africa relations, and draw up a specific plan for such cooperation in the economic and trade areas in next three years. (Beijing Summit, Section 7, 2006)

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