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## GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND MULTIPOLARITY IN FLUX

**Abstract:** The fact that certain military conflicts are present and peace is gradually threatened is part of our reality mostly since February 2022. This article aims to observe the cycle of the recent political trajectories and analyze the macro perspective of the ongoing political uncertainties. Furthermore, it can be argued that this process must be discussed in a complex way as far as it is much more than first meets the eye. Thus, it will be accurately emphasized how the current international system can be characterized or defined with its clear orientation. The power projection together with existing severe security issues worldwide is what matters for this discussion. Explaining things requires addressing certain theories that are expected to make better sense of reality. That is the reason why realism is addressed as a theoretical frame. What is power? What does the strongest state's lifecycle depend on? How to understand that once a unipolar anarchical international system becomes multipolar with its growing political and economic challenges? Under the anarchical international system where destructive weapons exist; stability becomes a top priority. However, we should take into consideration that not all states have the same values and actors perceive each other differently. Therefore, multipolarity or the increased number of leaders under anarchy is arguably more unstable compared to a bipolar world.

**Key words:** anarchy, realism, constructivism, multipolarity, military conflict, insecurity.

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### Introduction

An outstanding realist thinker Kenneth Waltz states that "the pressures of bipolarity have helped to produce responsibility of action" The author argues that when this tension changes it conditions a huge confusion among states and in a multipolar world it won't be clear who will be against whom. Hence, according to the author "Dangers from abroad may unify a state and spur its people to heroic action". (Waltz 1979) In the political scenario the actors might believe that: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend". (Manigault 1884)

In his book 'Politics' Heywood defines unipolarity as an international system in which there is one dominant state; from the hierarchy perspective it is the existence of a single great power. While claims that multipolarity is an international system in which there are three or more power centers, creating a bias in favour of fluidity and, perhaps, notability. (Heywood 2003)

It can be argued that global political order stays in a state of flux and as many scholars believe, it has been going through a severe phase since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In other words, there is no such condition in an anarchical international system that can be fixed or permanent. Having said that, this period can be considered crucial as far as the new world order is shaping which itself means that the international system will never be the way it was before the event.

Domination of the system, or hegemony, is commonly understood to refer to the entire world. However, the idea of a system can be used more narrowly to characterize particular areas, as the Western Hemisphere, Northeast Asia, and Europe. As a result, it is possible to discern between regional and global hegemonies—those that rule particular geographic regions and those that rule the entire planet. For the last 100 years at the very least, the United States has dominated the Western Hemisphere

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as a regional power. The United States is generally acknowledged as the only great power. (Mearsheimer 40, 2003)

On the other hand, certain theories address multipolarity as the reason why the occurrence of wars becomes more probable. Before our complex analysis, it can be argued that potentially it is always easier to measure issues between two rather than among multiple parties. Therefore, the latter is considered as the main incentive of violence and growing disorder. During the Cold War Era, the anarchical international system was hard bipolar, represented by the United States and the Soviet Union. Among IR scholars there is no fixed position about which system, Bipolar or Multipolar is more stable. Moreover, according to the IR schools, the perspectives on this matter vary. Furthermore, as Kenneth Waltz argues it is considered that the "Real Partnership" is only possible among equals. (Waltz 1979) That statement itself stays quite ambiguous. By instilling terror among the great countries, potential hegemony also encourage war. States in the international system are rife with fear, which motivates them to struggle for dominance in order to improve their chances of surviving in a perilous environment. The other great powers, on the other hand, are particularly alarmed by the rise of a prospective hegemon and will endeavor to redress the power imbalance by pursuing more dangerous policies. The explanation is straightforward: when a state poses a threat to the others, maintaining peace becomes less valuable in the long run, and threatened governments are more inclined to take risks to strengthen their security. It takes little for a potential hegemon to instill terror in the other nations within the system. Just its overwhelming power is likely to terrify nearby superpowers and force at least a few of them to establish a counterbalance alliance against their deadly foe. Rival great powers will be tempted to assume the worst about the potential hegemon's intentions because a state's intentions are difficult to ascertain and can change quickly. This will further reinforce the threatened nations' motive to contain and possibly even weaken the potential hegemon. (Mearsheimer 345, 2003)

The importance of international organizations is unprecedentedly important nowadays. Furthermore, according to a common belief, any integration, cooperation or alliance should be represented by the superior power and this is where inequality of states' power and influence becomes crucial or decisive. Therefore, the core concern is to identify which international system is a safer haven. For instance, during the Cold War Era, the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union had a growing tendency. In this regard, Waltz states that a bipolar world lessens the potential of conflict among states as he believes that one's threat is considered to be another's incentive to threaten back. The aforementioned scenario is more probable there where

actors are represented as equal powers and their threat contains vastly damaging potential. The main difference between multipolar and bipolar worlds according to Waltz are blurry situations in which interests, responsibilities, and duties are not clearly defined. Moreover, the importance of attention in a bipolar world is described as more focused. The tendency to have a nuclear weapon is growing among states and the crucial point is their understanding of how that power must be used. (Waltz 1979).

### 1.1 Methodology

The primary method used in this article is desk research. Moreover, it addresses realism while emphasizing the concepts of anarchy and power. Much of the material employed to discuss theory will consist of secondary sources in order to provide a more solid ground for analysis.

Qualitative research (QLR) is the method that the article uses. More precisely, causal Studies include process reconstructive methods. (Maxwell 1992) Furthermore, causality is explained by tracking and the process by which some events lead to or influence others. Causal explanations often have a narrative form that is presumed to be particular to that situation even if some patterns are shared with other situations. (Creswell 2009)

The main goal of this discussion is to understand how multipolarity in an anarchical international system complicates or facilitates potential peaceful cooperation. Therefore, the research question is as follows: What means can be used to characterize the upcoming world order? while the hypothesis is that: A great reshuffle of the anarchical international system is present.

### 2. Prehistory

The idea that wars do not occur randomly is the core belief of this discussion.

Why observing polarity can be crucial in the process of understanding global insecurity? The idea of fearful willingness to ensure independence and survival being central to integration is also evident in the realist assumption that small-states choose the path of integration based on a cost-benefit analysis, in order to feel secure and survive (Waltz 1979). Robert Keohane, too, a liberal who shares certain neorealist assumptions, has argued that "a state whose leaders consider that it can never act alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system" (Keohane, "Lilliputians"

Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics.") States, in other words, favor this policy of 'bandwagoning' in an attempt to ensure maximum gain and survival in the condition of anarchy and uncertainty of the system (Walt: 1990).

As there is no coercive authority everybody is free to do whatever they want. Even though the Security Dilemma (SD) dates back to John Hertz

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(1950), this definition comes from Robert Jervis. SD briefly refers to the situation in which one state's increased security simultaneously decreases the security of others. (Jervis 1968)

In his book 'Cooperation under security dilemma' published in 1978 Jervis argues that one's security causes another's insecurity in the reality in which no condition is permanent under the systemic level and states stay in flux. The author argues that anarchy itself encourages states' behavior and creates a paradox when a state is not willing to engage in war but finds itself doing so due to crucial misperceptions. Thus, the degree of potential threat among units pushes parties to think about defending themselves in order not to be conquered. Furthermore, as the author argues controlling areas on their borders or at least neutralizing them determines the degree of security for a state (Jervis 1968)

After the Soviet Union (SU) collapsed, several former SU states in the Black Sea region expressed their intention to cooperate with or join Western organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) and the European Union (EU)... The Russian Federation considered the latter situation to be a growing geopolitical threat. (Hill et al. 2014) At this point, for Russia 'the paramount objective became to keep NATO and the US at a distance' (Stuerner 2009, 224).

As Mearsheimer argues: "When nations are dissatisfied with the status quo, the prospects for deterrence are not promising". (Mearsheimer 1984) The crucial starting point in terms of the ongoing military conflict is considered to be the NATO declaration on the 13th of April, 2008 with the following statement: 'NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro Atlantic aspirations for membership. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO'. In the Bucharest Declaration where Georgia and Ukraine were considered as future members, worked as a direct threat to Putin. (<https://shorturl.at/IAC18>)

As many scholars argue, the disappearance of the Cold War bipolarity would alter the structural reality in which states had hitherto acted, give rise to a multipolar system that would now include EU states as the different poles of a new multipolarity and thus contribute to the jeopardizing of Cold War stability in Europe. In the context of a multipolar Europe, with new possible poles in the form of Europe's Great Powers, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and others, Cold War peace would irreversibly disappear and such possible benefits like the emergence of international institutions, democracy, and a stronger EC/EU would enable to balance such an outcome (Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition).

Arguably, critical cases like the Orange Revolution in 2004, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war,

and the revolution of dignity in 2014 anticipated the ongoing scenario and worked as dangerous precedents in this regard. We should also keep in mind that Georgia and Ukraine both joined the partnership for peace in 1994, in so doing they showed their willingness to sustain peace. While, by its actions in Europe's biggest territory, Russia clearly shows how a state's sovereignty can be ignored or disrespected.

The five-day war ended with a six-point peace plan that was initiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Furthermore, even though the initiative was stated on behalf of the EU not all members were willing to get involved in the conflict the way Sarkozy did.

The main concern at this point was the following: due to the different manipulations, a larger-scale military conflict could be probable. (Hill et al. 2014) The latter expectations turned out to be unavoidable as the war in Ukraine started in February 2022. Worth mentioning that, regarding the August War, the book 'Explaining Foreign Policy' by Mouritzen and Wivel highlights the following question: 'Why would Georgia attack South Ossetia in August 2008, with Russian forces conducting exercises nearby?' (Hill et al. 2014)

This statement can once again be used for strengthening the idea that a small state can never choose its fate as it's all about the realpolitik defined by powerful actors. Consequently, there was a precedent that clearly showed the potential danger that required careful and diplomatic means rather than harsh positioning that would never prevent it. Does it mean that the world is multipolar with the parties' gradually varied interests and that is the reason why at the earliest stage the ongoing war was not foreseen?

From the international theory perspective, as Kenneth Waltz argues, among men, like among states, anarchy or the absence of government is associated with the occurrence of violence. (Waltz 1979) With its brutal war in Ukraine, Russia distracted the existing peace balance. As a result, unprecedentedly Finland and Sweden decided to change their isolationist political positions as far as they acknowledged that whatever happens in Europe it directly impacts the neighboring countries. (NATO, 2022)

Furthermore, the fact that Finland and Sweden showed readiness and felt the necessity of joining NATO, once again proved the latter's sustainability. Thus, NATO's open-door policy stays viable and credible even in times of great uncertainty. As the matter of fact, Sweden is the country that stayed neutral since 1834 even in times of the Second World War, however, now unity plays a decisive role, to say the least, as the European security is in a great danger and the parties do face it. Obviously, this sudden shift means that the NATO expansion toward Nordic countries threatens Russia in terms of the European security paradigm. Therefore, the idea of being close to the NATO alliance was enough turned out to be

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naive as far as being its member is what matters in the end.

### 3. Opposing ideas

Realism is a theory of IR that emphasizes the anarchic state of international relations. According to that, the chief goal of states is to survive and strengthen or increase their role. However, since the system is anarchic and the states are engaged in a constant attempt to survive, they each act by their self-interest or *raison d'état* as they conduct their affairs about other states (Walt, 1998). Another important trait of the realist school of thought on IR is its pessimistic nature. Unlike other IR traditions, realists hardly at all believe in progress. Based on the negative anthropology manifest in the political thought of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes among others, realists emphasize the fixity of human nature and the anarchical nature of the system. Accordingly, while reflecting on international relations and human history, they primarily see not progress or difference, but essential sameness. According to realism, fear, egoism, and self-interest are principal tenets of the never-ending process of the battle to maximize security and ensure survival. That is intimately connected with the distribution and nature of military capability. (Mearsheimer 1984)

Realism, in short, conceives of states as the key actors of international politics and focuses on the category of power, mostly conceptualized as military or hard power. Due to their primary analytic concentration on sovereign states and their military capability, realists have been characterized by a skeptical position toward international institutions. Firstly, realists have seen international institutions not as considerable innovations, but as newer forms of the same old principle of state sovereignty. In other words, international institutions have been seen as carriers of states' interests. Secondly, they have seen international institutions as mirrors of the state's interests, especially that of strong states.

Waltz has, for instance, argued that 'strong states use institutions, as they interpret laws, in ways that suit them'. The hard bipolar world that ended in 1963-64 was conditioned by the initiatives of France and Communist China. A bipolar world is characterized by global interests and ambitions, however, leading powers at this point are not free to choose as they have a fixed set of rules which limits and frames their behavior. Hence, according to that logic more powerful states are less flexible. Fearing unequal gains, states are not likely to favor substantially close interstate cooperation. (Waltz 1979)

Hence, the states being conceived as sovereign actors each attempting to pursue their national interests, realists have expected that states are not likely to give up sovereignty and transfer it to a supranational power. Therefore, the EU, as a successful project of political integration, has

represented a puzzle for realists, especially in the aftermath of the disappearance of the traditional Cold War bipolarity after 1991. Some neorealists, such as John J Mearsheimer, even predicted its eventual failure in the conditions of the post-Cold War multipolar system likely to emerge. (Mearsheimer 1984)

Mearsheimer has argued that the peaceful process of integration in Cold War Europe might be explained by the coexistence of several structural factors. Firstly, this process was supported by "the bipolar distribution of military power on the Continent"; secondly, it was made possible due to the military equality between the two states, the US and the Soviet Union, which represented the two opposing poles; and thirdly, the factor of nuclear deterrence played a positive role. (Mearsheimer 1984)

Waltz summarizes his article by saying that it was a bipolar world that conditioned peace which lasted for a long time. In other words, he criticizes a multipolar structure by saying that even interests under increased superpowers are not clearly defined and any tension at this point is considered as a risky condition. On the other hand, before a distinct bipolarity would emerge in the interwar period between 1919 and 1939 the Great Powers did not cooperate much with one another, precisely due to their fear of unequal, asymmetrical gains. It was only amid the appearance of a clear bipolarity that their fears abated, the mistrust decreased and they began to cooperate. (Waltz 1979)

In Wendt's article on anarchy, he refers to the realist perspective that highlights that the "self-help" system is an unavoidable part of the anarchical international system. As the author mentions the core complements in that statement are missing as far as the "central authority and collective security are absent" (Wendt 1999b). Wendt argues "against the neorealist claim that self-help is given by anarchic structure exogenously to process" (Wendt 1999b). Importantly, he differentiates process from structure. The latter concept will not exist with the process itself which frames and determines the structure as such. Hence, the author explains how "self-help" and power politics under the anarchical international system are conditioned by social means. Moreover, "identities and interests are transformed under anarchy: by the institution of sovereignty, by an evolution of cooperation, and by intentional efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective identities" (Wendt 1999b).

Wendt criticizes Waltz and argues that his explanation of anarchy is incomplete as he defines anarchy as "a condition of possibility for or "permissive" cause of war, arguing that "wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them." Waltz in this statement draws attention to the human nature which is the main reason why conflict occurs. Moreover, "the logic of anarchy seems by itself to



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constitute self-help and power politics as necessary features of world politics" (Wendt 1999b).

However, the global order is not unipolar. The United States is not a global hegemon, despite being one in the Western Hemisphere. Without a doubt, the United States dominates both the military and the economy of the globe. China and Russia, however, are the other two superpowers in the international system. Even though neither is as strong as American military power, however, both possess nuclear weapons, the ability to oppose and most likely repel an American invasion of their country, as well as a restricted capacity for power projection. (Mearsheimer 381, 2003)

On the other hand, the classical realists contend that the existence of a multipolar power structure and a "flexible" alliance system enhances stability (Morgenthau 1967, Gulick 1955), while neorealists contend that bipolarity outperforms multipolarity in terms of stability like Waltz 1979 and Mearsheimer 2003. Neorealists use polarity as a primary explanatory variable, but they have very little evidence to support their claims. Their arguments regarding earlier historical eras are not supported, and they overgeneralize from the Cold War experience, where bipolarity is confused with the existence of nuclear weapons and other important variables. While bipolarity is less common than multipolarity, it has happened before, as evidenced by the numerous wars that erupted during the Athens-Sparta rivalry in the fifth century BC and the Habsburg-Valois rivalry in the early sixteenth century. (Levy 147, 1998)

Wendt argues that while talking about the political structure Waltz says little about states behavior. Therefore, it is not clear what differentiates friendly states from unfriendly ones. The latter determines to what extent these states would recognize or support each other's sovereignty or other vital matters while interacting. At this point, while analyzing Waltz's perspective Wendt argues that actors' actions are framed by the "balance of threats". (Wendt 1999b)

Hence, Wendt claims that Waltz is missing the content of probable tendencies under anarchy. According to the author's concept about the "structure of identity and interest," the latter concept is not logically linked with the anarchical international system. Therefore, Wendt draws attention to the fact that an actor behaves differently with a state that is considered as a friend, while the same actor will act in a vastly different way when it comes to the state which somehow threatens its existence. Moreover, the author believes that "a state may have multiple identities as "sovereign," "leader of the free world," "imperial power," and so on" (Wendt 1999b).

According to Wendt states' interests are based on their identity which does not have fixed characteristics, but on the contrary, they are shaped by the unique and consistently changing scenarios as the

states continually interact. Hence, actors are in a constant flux that creates and conditions situations. Wendt describes institutions as relatively stable structures, which consist of interests together with identities. In particular, rules and norms are meant by this. Hence, this set of rules was not always there and it is the product of the process of states' interaction. Wendt claims that "institutionalization is a process of internalizing new identities and interests, while socialization is a cognitive process, not just a behavioral one".

Interestingly, from Wendt's perspective, "Self-help is an institution, one of the various structures of identity and interest that may exist under anarchy. Processes of identity formation under anarchy are concerned first and foremost with preservation or "security" of the self" (Wendt 1999b).

From a realist's perspective, collective action becomes difficult as the system is competitive and one's gain is considered to be another's loss from the security point of view.

Wendt at this point argues that partnership in security issues creates a common sense of responsibility among parties. Waltz states that "international political systems, like economic markets, are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units." (Waltz 1979) Wendt believes that "Self-help is an institution, not a constitutive feature of anarchy" (Wendt 1999b).

Waltz argues that "competition and socialization, by which structure conditions state action." The content of his argument about this conditioning, however, presupposes a selfhelp system that is not itself a constitutive feature of anarchy. As Wendt points out, Waltz's two mechanisms condition behavior, not identity and interest." This explains how Waltz can be accused of both "individualism" and "structuralism." (Wendt 1999b).

Causality among states conditioned by their interaction is the crucial point from Wendt's perspective. In other words, one state's action is caused by the interaction in which others consistently act and condition each other's behavior. Regarding institutions, the author argues that "institutions transform identities and interests," emphasizing that the key to such transformations is relatively stable practice" (Wendt 1999b).

Furthermore, Wendt highlights that "Sovereignty is an institution, and so it exists only by certain intersubjective understandings and expectations; there is no sovereignty without another" (Wendt 1999b).

This statement strengthens the fact that identities differ from each other and the institutions among them are defined by comparison as a product of social interaction.

Regarding cooperation, Wendt argues that it is a difficult process that requires complex actions among the so-called egoist states. At this point, the

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recognition of each other's sovereignty does not automatically condition their cooperation. The latter activity requires an efficient strategy with incentives for its parties. Moreover, the author says that "A constructivist analysis of cooperation, in contrast, would concentrate on how the expectations produced by behavior affect identities and interests" (Wendt 1999b).

#### 4. Conclusion, limitations, and future lines of research

Therefore, for the following four reasons, bipolarity is the most stable architecture available. First, there is only one potential conflict dyad involving the great powers and comparatively fewer opportunities for conflict in bipolarity. Great powers tend to fight minor powers rather than the opposing great power when they engage in bipolar warfare.

Second, bipolarity is a significant structural source of stability since it increases the likelihood of power being distributed equally among the major powers. Moreover, the big powers have little chance of banding together against other nations or exploiting smaller ones. Third, bipolarity lessens the chance that the major powers will make a mistake and start a conflict by discouraging miscalculation. Fourth, despite the fact that fear is a constant factor in international politics, bipolarity does not make states' anxieties more severe. For that reasons, balanced multipolarity is more likely to result in conflict than bipolarity. First, there are a lot more opportunities for conflict when there is multipolarity, particularly between the great powers. However, it is unlikely that all the great powers will be involved in a war at the same time. Second, the leading states are likely to have unequal power distribution, and the more powerful states will be more likely to initiate wars because they believe they have what it takes to win. Great powers will also have plenty of opportunities to unite against third parties and to subjugate or force smaller powers. Third, because there are no particularly large power disparities between the major states in the system, miscalculation is probably going to be a major issue in balanced multipolarity, though high levels of anxiety among the great powers are unlikely. (Mearsheimer 346, 2003)

Therefore, multipolarity is less measurable and more complicated. Furthermore, "the absence of peripheries, the range and intensity of competition and the persistent of pressure and crisis are among the most important characteristics of the period since WWII" (Waltz 1979, 886).

Today's world is far from being unipolar or hard bipolar. In this regard, Waltz believes that "Multipolar military systems are more unstable than unipolar and bipolar ones because there are more points of interactions and thus more opportunities for miscalculations, as each country seeks to re-adjust the

balance of power in its favor". (Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 131)

Despite the above-mentioned arguments, there is considerable ambiguity among neorealists, who consider bipolarity to be more stable than multipolarity, and classical realists, who argue that stability is further enhanced by multipolar power distribution and "flexible" alliance system. Neorealists are also criticized for having very little evidence to support their claims regarding polarity as a key explanatory variable, although they rely heavily on it. They do not show that their ideas apply to earlier periods of history, and instead generalize the Cold War experience, conflating bipolarity with the presence of nuclear weapons and other important circumstances. Proponents of neorealists also claim that bipolarity and multipolarity can be equally prone to war and that conflicts arise for different reasons. Therefore, they believe that the structural conditions and polarity are not the main causal factors in the outbreak of war. (Levy 1998)

It is possible that unipolarity is merely a transitional state. The emergence of five or more major actors and the asymmetrical threats posed by so-called "rogue" states and international terrorism provide compelling evidence that the world order of the twenty-first century will be multipolar (see p. 382). The main players would be China, an EU dominated by Germany, Japan, and Russia, with important regional players emerging in the form of Brazil and India, in addition to the USA, which unquestionably continues to hold leadership in areas of "safe" power like intellectual capital and advanced technology. The rapid economic growth China has experienced since the 1970s when market reforms were introduced, its sizable population, and an increasing military power. According to World Bank estimates, China's economy will surpass all others by 2020 if current growth rates continue. After the end of the Cold War, Germany and the EU have demonstrated signs of increased assertiveness and independence from the USA and NATO, in addition to making steady economic progress since the 1950s. The expansion of the European Union, the strengthening of its defense capabilities, and the quickening pace of monetary and political union are all examples of this. Japan enjoys advantages from its connections to the "tiger" states of east and southeast Asia, and its economy is the second largest in the world.

Although Russia may no longer be a superpower in terms of economics and may have lost control of eastern Europe, its nuclear arsenal guarantees that it will continue to be a significant diplomatic force, and the abundance of its natural resources and population lay the groundwork for future economic growth. (Heywood 136, 2003)

To sum it up, cooperation and unanimity among those who share a core value system are decisive

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mostly in times of the great uncertainty. This matter requires further analyses. Ideally, the scholars must lessen the given uncertainty by structuring an effective

theoretical discussions that will ultimately stay peace-oriented.

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