



Trilateral cooperation between Australia, Japan and South Korea: Potential and possibilities

Lauren Richardson

**TRILATERAL COOPERATION BETWEEN
AUSTRALIA, JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA:
POTENTIAL AND POSSIBILITIES**

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Cover image: The liquefied hydrogen carrier, which will be used as part of a hydrogen supply chain pilot project between Australia and Japan, is docked at Kobe Works yard in Kobe, western Japan, on July 15. (Photo by Hideyuki Miura)

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INTRODUCTION

Australia and Japan share one of the most complementary and sophisticated bilateral partnerships among the constellation of countries in the “Indo-Pacific.” The relationship has evolved to constitute a key pillar in many of the multilateral and minilateral diplomatic and security arrangements within the region. Given the strength of the relationship, a question that often arises in regional governance dialogues is: what arrangements might fruitfully be configured from this bilateral partnership to amplify its synergies and promote regional stability?

This paper argues that one such area is greater trilateral cooperation with South Korea. There are strong rationales for enhancing trilateral cooperation among the three countries. Australia, Japan and South Korea share complementary economic and governance systems and have overlapping memberships in a range of multilateral regional institutions, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). They also have common interests in the preservation and development of the regional and international “rules-based order,” under which they have all prospered economically over past decades. Moreover, they have shared concerns about the growing threats to the rules-based order, the waning regional and global influence of their mutual US ally, and the ramifications of the intensifying Sino-US rivalry. Against this backdrop, Canberra, Seoul and Tokyo have, to varying degrees, been demonstrably seeking to shape the region’s economic, political and security landscape.

Of course, there are some obvious challenges to deeper and broader trilateral cooperation. The relationship between Seoul and Tokyo, which has long been characterised by diplomatic volatility, deteriorated considerably in 2019 and has yet to recover. A second challenge is that, unlike Tokyo and Canberra, Seoul has yet to

adopt the “Indo-Pacific” as its regional policy framework and still subscribes to the “Asia-Pacific” as its regional paradigm. On the whole, the South Korean government has been sceptical of the Indo-Pacific concept, which it perceives as a Japanese strategic construct directed toward the containment of China.¹ These challenges, however, are not insurmountable, which I elaborate on below.

This paper aims to establish cooperative trilateral agendas for. Given the diplomatic fault lines between Tokyo and Seoul, the focus of the analysis will be on Canberra’s relations with both countries and the potential role for Australian officials to coordinate trilaterally its policies with both countries. Toward this end, it will begin by examining the scope of Australia’s bilateral cooperation with both Japan and South Korea examining the foundation and rationale for trilateral cooperation. Based on this analysis, the paper will identify rationales and inherent challenges to trilateral cooperation and consider how the latter might be overcome. It will then outline two potential platforms for trilateral cooperation: the development of hydrogen energy and capacity building in the Pacific Islands. The paper will conclude by offering recommendations for how Canberra could facilitate the realisation of these agendas. In short, I propose that Australian officials initiate and sponsor track-two trilateral dialogues on these two separate agendas, to elicit suggestions on how they might be transposed to a trilateral setting. On the basis of these recommendations, the Australian government should endeavor to conduct bilateral working-level talks with Japanese and South Korean officials to gauge the conditions and circumstances under which they may be willing to coordinate trilaterally on these agendas. The goal of these track-two and working-level discussions would be the attainment of a high-level trilateral dialogue to discuss these agendas and regional governance more broadly.



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AUSTRALIA'S BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA

There are strong institutional and interest-based grounds for enhancing trilateral cooperation among Japan, Australia, and South Korea. This section examines Australia's bilateral partnerships with Japan and South Korea with a view to identifying commonalities that could potentially be reconfigured as trilateral agendas.

Japan

Over the past few decades, Australia and Japan have established a highly complementary and sophisticated bilateral relationship. This has been achieved through the enactment of various economic, diplomatic and security agreements, and the development of extensive people-to-people links. One of the most

vibrant and enduring aspects of the relationship is cooperation in the energy and resources sector. This dates from the 1960s and 70s, when Japanese investment played a significant role in the expansion of Australia's coal and iron ore export industries. Then from the 1980s, Japan became a major investor in Australia's LNG export industry. Conversely, Australia—with its extensive natural energy and mineral resources—emerged as a major supplier of key minerals and energy to Japan. In fact, Australia provides around one-fifth of Japan's LNG imports and over 60 percent of Japan's iron ore imports.² Today the two countries hold regular policy dialogues on energy and resource issues and are working closely

on the development of renewable energy technology and clean coal technology.

The defence and security domain is another burgeoning aspect of Australia and Japan's bilateral partnership. Canberra's embrace of Tokyo as a strategic partner has been driven by the many convergences in their respective regional security outlooks, particularly their mutual concerns about China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. This strategic alignment between Canberra and Tokyo has materialised in the gradual upgrading of their security ties, which were first institutionalised in 2007. It has also eventuated in Australia's participation in the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (hereafter the Quad), a Japanese initiative intended to draw "likeminded democracies" (Japan, the US, Australia, and India) into a common security arrangement. Although the Quad was disbanded in 2008 in response to diplomatic protests by China, Australia agreed to engage in its revised version in 2017, amid resurgent South China Sea tensions.

On the bilateral level, Australia and Japan agreed a Reciprocal Access Agreement in 2022, which provides a legal framework for the self-defence forces of Australia and Japan to operate on another's soil. The protracted negotiation process that this entailed, however, revealed that there were points of contention in the bilateral relationship. This included differences in the two countries' justice systems. The negotiations also lost momentum as a result of cancellations of reciprocal prime ministerial visits on account of the Australian bushfire crisis of 2019-20 and subsequently, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In any case, the security relationship between Australia and Japan is evidently on a firm trajectory of deepening institutionalisation.

South Korea

Australia's cooperative ties with South Korea, while not as comprehensive as that with Japan, have substantially matured since the two countries normalized relations in 1961. Most notably, the two countries have established a

thriving economic and trade relationship. This began to develop in the early 1960s, a time when South Korea sought large amounts of raw materials to fuel its industrialisation efforts. By the 1990s, South Korea has evolved to become Australia's fourth-largest two-way trading partner (after China, the US and Japan). Their partnership underwent a significantly upgrade in 2014 with enactment of the Korea Australia Free Trade Agreement (KAFTA). As a result of this deal Australian exports to South Korea increased by almost a quarter, and total bilateral trade in services between 2017-18 was valued at \$3.0 billion.³ South Korea's imports from Australia mainly entail the commodities iron ore, coal, beef, sugar and wheat; exports include cars, electronics and machinery. The energy sector is also emerging as an increasingly important pillar of the two countries' trade relationship. Australia is a major provider of South Korea's coal and gas supply, and more recently, hydrogen energy has emerged as a significant bilateral interest.⁴

Since the two governments formalised a security agreement in 2009, there have also been notable strides in the strategic domain of the Australia-South Korea relationship. Cooperation in this realm has been driven by mutual concerns about the challenging security environment on the Korean peninsula, and threats to regional stability more broadly. Both governments regard regional stability as an essential factor in national economic prosperity and security, and recognise the necessity of combining defence resources and expertise toward this end. Their strategic partnership has gathered further momentum since 2019 in the context of Seoul's growing concerns about the erratic Trump administration, and contentious cost share negotiations in connection to the US-ROK alliance. While both Canberra and Seoul advocate for the continued commitment of their US ally to the Indo-Pacific, the widening trust deficit in the US-ROK alliance has spurred the Moon government to strengthen its strategic partnership with Canberra.⁵ Besides the US, Australia is the only country to conduct a 2+2 ministerial meeting with South Korea. During President Moon Jae-in's visit to Canberra in December 2021, the

bilateral relationship was elevated to the status of “comprehensive strategic partnership”. This upgrade of the relationship was a reflection of the depth of bilateral cooperation that the two countries have achieved since normalising their diplomatic ties, and a commitment to work together more closely in the realms of defence, the securing of critical supply chains, digital transformation, and the hydrogen economy.⁶

Despite this trend of deepening institutionalisation, the Australia-South Korea relationship is widely regarded by scholars and former officials alike as being underdeveloped and slow in reaching its potential.⁷ There have indeed been a number of factors that have served to hinder the development of the bilateral relationship. The scope of South

Korea’s foreign policy has tended not to encompass Australia; it has been focused rather on North Korea, the United States, China, Japan and more recently, ASEAN. Australia has similarly invested more foreign policy resources in regional partners other than South Korea. In more recent years, there has been a wariness on Seoul’s part toward Australia’s ever-deepening security partnership with Tokyo. This wariness has been reinforced by occasional public affirmations from Australian leaders to the effect that Japan is “[our] closest friend in Asia.”⁸ Seoul’s apprehensions has been further compounded since by Canberra’s increasingly hardline posture toward Beijing, a trend that has not been mirrored nor supported by South Korean officials.



South Korean and Australian military chiefs agree to beef up cooperation. Image credit: Yonhap



FOUNDATIONS FOR TRILATERAL COOPERATION: RATIONALES AND CHALLENGES

From this overview of the pillars of Australia's bilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea, what sort of ventures can be transposed to the trilateral context? And what are the inherent challenges to this potential trilateral arrangement? Australia's foreign policy quandaries in the region are commonly conceptualised as diplomatic balancing acts between China and the US, and to a lesser extent, between China and Japan.⁹ Yet an often-overlooked challenge is the management of bilateral relations with South Korea and Japan, which in many ways also resembles a diplomatic tightrope. This section will identify the synergies in Australia's respective bilateral ventures with Japan and South Korea that would provide the most solid foundation for trilateral cooperation. It argues that, at present, sensitivities associated with defence collaboration between Seoul and Tokyo would render this domain largely non-viable for a trilateral framework. The robust economic links between the three

countries, on the other hand, would offer a stronger foundation.

Despite the fact that Australia has deepened its security ties with Japan and South Korea considerably in recent years, traditional defence cooperation among the three parties is not a practicable means—at least at present—of promoting regional security or defending the rules-based order. This is partly owing to South Korea's hesitance toward engaging in exercises that be construed as overtly curtailing China's influence.¹⁰ More of an obstacle, however, is the burden of history in Japan-South Korea relations and the constraints that this imposes on Seoul's foreign and defence policy toward Tokyo. Owing to a prevalent belief in South Korea that the Japanese government has not adequately atoned for its imperial transgressions, public opinion in South Korea is stacked against the notion of security cooperation with Japan, public opinion in South Korea is stacked against the notion of security

cooperation even in its relatively benign form of bilateral intelligence sharing.¹¹ This has been evinced in recent years in the various controversies surrounding the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), an intelligence sharing pact that was agreed in 2016. As a corollary of South Korea's sensitivities to Japan's defence activities, officials in Seoul have been somewhat wary of the developments in Australia and Japan's security relationship. There are, however, promising indications that Tokyo and Seoul have now past the 2019 peak of the recent fractious period in their diplomatic relationship; instances of diplomatic friction have significantly decreased, and the colonial victim lawsuits that have been at the centre of much of the two countries' tensions have also stabilised.

The economic dimension of this pair of bilateral relationships may provide a more conducive context for trilateral cooperation. In contrast to the defence ties between Japan and South Korea, which are tenuous at the best of times, their respective economies have remain deeply integrated over the past few decades, even in spite of recent adverse developments in their trade relationship. The economic realm of the bilateral relationship also tends to be less susceptible to leadership dynamics and the domestic politics of both countries. And while Australia, Japan and South Korea have long been

heavily dependent on China and the United States for trade, there is mutual concern about this status quo among the three governments. This has been fuelled by the ever-expanding frontiers of former US President Donald Trump's trade war within the region, and also by Xi Jinping's tendency to employ economic coercion to realise his foreign policy objectives. Such concerns have been exacerbated by the breakdown in supply chains that occurred in the wake of China's initial COVID-19 outbreak, which saw its industrial hub of Wuhan come to a virtual standstill. In light of such developments, the three governments share a common interest in diversifying trade away from China and the United States, and deepening economic ties with other strategic partners in the region.

In short, while Canberra, Tokyo and Seoul have mutual apprehensions about threats to the rules-based order and regional security more broadly, it would not feasible to address such challenges through traditional trilateral defence cooperation. A more viable alternative would be to defend the economic aspects of the rules-based order by strengthening three-way economic and trade relations, and promoting regional stability through bolstering the infrastructure of other (more vulnerable) countries—particularly democracies—in the Indo-Pacific.



President Moon Jae-In speaks at an event spotlighting the government's hydrogen energy vision and policy held in Incheon on 7 October. Yonhap



POTENTIAL TRILATERAL AGENDAS

Based on these common logics in Australia's bilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea, this section will extrapolate two potential concrete agendas for trilateral cooperation. The first entails the trade and development of renewable energy, drawing on the three governments' interests in decarbonising their economies. The second agenda involves coordinated capacity building in the Pacific Islands based on their shared objectives of promoting regional stability.

Renewable energy trade and development

The development and trade of renewable energy is one of the most rapidly advancing domains of Canberra's partnerships with Tokyo and Seoul, and expanding this endeavour to a trilateral context would doubtlessly have a synergistic effect on the three economies. Advancements in this domain have been driven by the ascension of climate change on the global

agenda, and the concomitant efforts of Australia, Japan and South Korea to shift to a greener society. The generation of hydrogen energy is now a key interest of the three governments, and a significant pillar of their respective national plans to decarbonise their economies. Australia aspires to become a regional leader in this sector, and according to The International Energy Agency, has the potential to produce approximately 100 million tonnes of oil in hydrogen for export.¹² Japan and South Korea, both prime targets for this Australian market, have developed their own hydrogen strategies.¹³ South Korea plans to establish a hydrogen economy by 2040, by which point it hopes to power 30 per cent of its cities and towns with hydrogen, and manufacture 6.2 million hydrogen fuel cell cars. Japan, which has only a fraction of its nuclear generators operational, is similarly aspiring to make hydrogen the backbone of its economy, and to reduce its dependence on foreign oil and gas imports.



Australia's first public hydrogen refuelling station in Fyshwick, Canberra. Wikimedia Commons

These mutual interests in the hydrogen energy sector have already seen strong bilateral momentum between Australia and Japan and Australia and South Korea. When leaders Moon Jae-in and Scott Morrison met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2019, Moon acknowledged the deepening of “cooperative ties in energy resources” between the two countries, and conveyed his intention to expand the scope of this to include “the hydrogen economy and core minerals.”¹⁴ In the same month, Australia and Japan signed a Memorandum of Cooperation to promote bilateral exploration of carbon recycling technologies. This has enabled collaborative research on the development of renewable energy technologies utilising carbon dioxide.¹⁵ Then in January 2020, Australian and Japanese trade ministers met in Melbourne to sign a joint statement of cooperation that affirmed Australia’s potential as a to be a major exporter of hydrogen to Japan; the agreement also paved the way for cooperation on the Hydrogen Energy Supply Chain (HESC) project in the state of Victoria, which aims to develop the world’s first international liquid hydrogen supply chain.

In a speech delivered at the Lowy Institute in 2019, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison surprisingly hinted at a desire to triangulate Canberra’s bilateral energy initiatives with Japan

and South Korea. Indeed, he expressed his hopes that Tokyo and Seoul will reconcile over their history-related problems, in the context of exalting Australia’s bilateral energy ties to both countries, and even linked such a reconciliation to improved regional stability:

... I am also pleased to accept Prime Minister Abe’s invitation to visit Japan early next year. And I also intend to put more effort into our relationship with the Republic of Korea—building on our significant trade, energy and infrastructure ties... We agree that our relationship has significant further potential, including in hydrogen, critical minerals and security. I would add that the Indo-Pacific would be even stronger if Japan and the ROK can overcome their recent tensions.¹⁶

Australia’s bilateral collaboration with Japan and South Korea in the hydrogen energy sector looks set to gain considerable pace from now and into the coming years. Australia plans to build its first hydrogen charging station in Canberra in 2020, and expects to receive 20 hydrogen fuel-cell electric vehicles from South Korea as part of this initiative.¹⁷ For its part, South Korea is seeking to boost the hydrogen economy to support its economic growth; the

Moon administration expects to increase the number of hydrogen fuel-cell electric vehicles to approximately 80,000 units by 2022.¹⁸ Australia and South Korea have furthermore signed an Memorandum of Understanding that calls for the establishment of a working-level group to exchange of information on the potentials for greater cooperation on the hydrogen economy. Japan, on the other hand, plans to have 200,000 fuel cell vehicles in operation by 2025 and up to 800,000 by 2030.¹⁹ Japan's mountainous and densely-populated landscape is not conducive to the production of renewable energy, and therefore its goals are dependent on hydrogen imports from Australia.²⁰

Evidently, Canberra, Seoul and Tokyo are well positioned to maximise the opportunities presented by their mutual interests in the hydrogen energy sector. As a starting point, the Japan-Australia Energy and Resources Dialogue—the primary mechanism driving Canberra and Tokyo's energy cooperation forward—could logically be extended to encompass South Korea. If the three governments could enact a three-way cooperative agreement for trade and development in this sector, it would not only help them to establish greener economies, but

would also mitigate against the rise of protectionist trade policies in the region.

Pacific development

There are also strong institutional and interest-based grounds for trilateral cooperation in the Pacific Islands region. In recent years, Canberra, Tokyo and Seoul have individually sought to strengthen their engagement with Pacific Islands states and are contributing toward their development to varying degrees. The underlying premise of this engagement—at least in Canberra and Tokyo's case—has been a desire to ensure that this sub-region is not subsumed by Beijing's expanding sphere of influence. As it is unlikely that any one of the three governments could unilaterally compete with China's influence the Pacific Islands, and in light of the fact that they are not in competition with one another in this arena, there is a strong rationale for coordinating their capacity building efforts. Such a pursuit would align with the "peace cooperation" principle of President Moon Jae-in's foreign policy doctrine, and also Japan and Australia's objectives of realizing a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Pacific Islands' Leaders have ostensibly also expressed a commitment to securing a "free, open and sustainable maritime order based on the rule of law in the Pacific."²¹



Funded largely by China Development Bank, the \$150 million Nadarivatu hydroelectric plant will be operated by the Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) (Image: HydroWorld)

The Pacific Islands are a site of increasing contestation within the region, a circumstance that has been described by Graeme Dunk as “geographic positioning.” The outcome of this contestation will determine the strategic balance across not only the Pacific, but also further into Asia.²² China’s growing interest and expanding presence in the Pacific Islands has been interpreted in Australia and Japan as an extension of the Beijing’s objective to control sea routes in the South China Sea. Against this backdrop, media reports that emerged in 2018 alleging that Beijing was attempting to establish a port in Vanuatu, were met with widespread alarm—particularly in Canberra. Then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull remarked that “we would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific Island countries and neighbours of ours.”²³ China evidently intends to increase its foothold—whether military, ideological, political or otherwise—within this sub-region. This is apparent from Beijing’s large-scale infrastructural development on individual islands in the Pacific, which has been financed mostly through loans, and its bid to lease the entire island of Tulagi in the Solomon Islands for a 75-year period. Dunk has argued that if China ultimately succeeds in gaining control of or closing routes in this region, “traffic to Japan and South Korea will have to travel even further out into the Pacific” and “the ability of the US to manoeuvre freely will be affected.”²⁴

Australia, Japan and South Korea will all be impacted to varying degrees by the geopolitical developments occurring in the Pacific Islands region. In light of this reality, and in the context of waning US influence in the Indo-Pacific, there are strong incentives for the three countries to cooperate in this domain. There are a number of agendas in the Pacific Islands region that lend themselves to trilateral cooperation. Against the backdrop of states in the Pacific Islands accumulating potentially unsustainable debt burdens from Chinese loans, the three governments could attempt to offset Beijing’s

economic leverage by coordinating their infrastructural development efforts in this arena. Recent projects that have been pursued unilaterally among the three countries have included the construction of international airports and climate change centres. In addition to coordinating such projects trilaterally, the three governments could work together on developing sustainable economic policies to assist Pacific Islands states in attaining greater fiscal resiliency. As these policies would be geared toward promoting the autonomy of Pacific Islands states, they could not easily be construed as curtailing Chinese influence.

There are already solid institutional grounds for such cooperation. Japan and South Korea are dialogue partners in the Pacific Islands Forum while Australia has member status. Australia and South Korea also hold a Memorandum of Understanding that provides a framework for cooperation on development assistance, and recognises South Korea as an important emerging development partner for Australia in Asia and the Pacific.²⁵ A key existing institution with coordinate to oversee trilateral initiatives is Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) convened by Japan. This meeting, which has been held every three years in Japan since 1997, is attended by the Japanese prime minister, the leaders of 14 Pacific Island states, and ministers from New Zealand and Australia. Given that a number of Pacific Islands states have been newly incorporated into PALM over the years, Japan could consider extending institutional membership to Australia and South Korea. In fact, former Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Taro expressed a willingness to work with additional partners on Pacific development initiatives.²⁶

In short, hydrogen energy and capacity building in the Pacific Islands represent practicable opportunities for trilateral cooperation between Canberra, Seoul and Tokyo. Neither of these agendas are overtly defence-oriented, and they also circumvent the South China Sea, which is diplomatically sensitive for South Korea.

CONCLUSION

Evidently, the Indo-Pacific region is becoming increasingly volatile as the Sino-US strategic rivalry plays out. While this state of affairs threatens to undermine the rules-based order, it also presents opportunities for convergence between likeminded states in the region, particularly those with the capacities to influence regional political dynamics through coalition building. This paper has sought to explore the potentials for Australia, Japan and South Korea to navigate this tumultuous regional landscape through trilateral cooperation.

In light of the combined impact of Sino-US tensions and the global pandemic on national economies in the Indo-Pacific, the time is ripe for Australia, Japan and South Korea to strengthen their mutual trade partnerships and mitigate dependence on Beijing and Washington. In the context of the three governments' converging interests in the hydrogen economy, and also the trend toward rising protectionism in the region, the trade and development of renewable energy offers a promising trilateral platform for cooperation. Moreover, as norms pertaining to freedom of passage come increasingly under threat in the region, there are strong grounds for the three governments to coordinate their development and capacity building efforts in the Pacific Islands. With the regional and global order in a state of flux, Australia, Japan and South Korea will increasingly depend on a network of partners that extends beyond the great powers in the Indo-Pacific for security and economic purposes.

Based on the above analysis, I offer the following recommendations for the Australian government:

1. In many ways, Japan and South Korea represent the front line of Australia's Indo-Pacific policy. The shifting political landscape in Japan and South Korea respectively ushered in by a recent leadership transition and in impending presidential election, present a valuable opportunity for Australian

officials to encourage convergence between these two key partners who have ostensibly passed the peak of a fractious period in their bilateral relationship. In light of this, I propose that Australian officials initiate and sponsor track-two trilateral dialogues on the separate agendas of hydrogen energy and capacity building in the Pacific Islands, to elicit suggestions on how they might be transposed to a trilateral setting.

2. On the basis of these recommendations, the Australian government should endeavor to conduct bilateral working-level talks with Japanese and South Korean officials to gauge the conditions and circumstances under which they may be willing to coordinate trilaterally on these agendas. Specifically, Australian officials should discuss with Japanese counterparts the potential for PALM membership to be extended to Australia and South Korea. They should also raise with Seoul and Tokyo the prospect of a trilateral energy and resources dialogue.
3. The goal of these track-two and working-level discussions would be the attainment of a high-level trilateral dialogue to discuss these agendas and regional governance more broadly. If successful in this regard, Australian officials should consider this trilateral cooperation as a basis for a new minilateral regional governance mechanism, that might even incorporate other states within the region.

In sum, by pursuing trilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea, the Australian government serves to benefit by generating synergies on key national and foreign policy policies, and in turn bolstering its bilateral relations with both Japan and South Korea. Fostering closer relations between Tokyo and Seoul would all align with Australia's interest in strengthening the web of "like-minded" countries in the Indo-Pacific.

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