

***INDIA–US DEFENCE COOPERATION: STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT OR
THE EXPANSION OF AMERICAN HEGEMONIC INFLUENCE IN
SOUTH ASIA***

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Abstract:

The study investigates the nature of India -US strategic alignment and the consequences of US hegemonic influence on the political and security landscape of South Asia. At the onset of the twenty - first century, the United States initiated closer strategic cooperation with India aimed at containing china, resulting in increased military assistance and capability - building. Major initiatives, such as bilateral agreements, civil nuclear deals, missile defence and space collaboration, and India's integration into the QUAD, have reinforced the US-India relationship. This research explores the underlying factors that have transformed India-US relations into a full-fledged strategic partnership. Throughout much of the past decade, notably under Barack Obama presidency, defence as emerged as a central pillar of India -US cooperation. Reflecting a strategic realism that drives the bilateral aspirations of both countries. The study analyses the evolution of India-US relations from the Obama to Trump administrations, highlighting that changes in leadership style did not significantly alter the core strategic framework. Recently, there is a renewal of the 10- year Defence Cooperation Agreement (**DCA**) between India and the USA on october 31, initially signed in 2005, with the aim of sustaining bilateral stability at a time when trade tariff disputes have strained relations.

Keywords:

India-U.S. Defence Cooperation ; Strategic Alignment ; American Hegemony ; South Asian Security ; Indo - Pacific Strategy ; QUAD ; Defence Diplomacy ; Strategic Partnership ; Military Modernisation; Balance of Power.

Introduction:

In contrast to the challenges confronting many U.S security partnerships globally, the U.S - India defence relationship has witnessed sustained strengthening since the Obama administration. This has been reinforced by mutual apprehensions over china's assertive posture in the Indian Ocean and along the contested Sino-Indian frontier, resulting in military engagement and the renewed prominence of the QUAD framework involving Australia and Japan.

Security cooperation has emerged as a central and sustaining pillar of the India-U.S. bilateral relationship. Increasingly, growing skepticism in Washington from both the left and the right has expressed doubts about whether U.S commitments to India are proportionate to their tangible returns. Even so, over the past two decades, bipartisan consensus has largely upheld India's rise as a strategic long-term bet, notwithstanding the relatively limited immediate gains. India's pre-pandemic economic deceleration, cautious handling of Chinese border challenges, enduring defense ties with Russia and relatively low defense capital investment have collectively fueled doubts in the United States about the future of the partnership. While such issues are not new, they have gained increased visibility in recent years as India has actively promoted its identity as an emerging global power and strategic actor.

In the aftermath of the signing of the decade-long defence framework, U.S Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth quoted that "Military Ties with New Delhi have never been stronger". Signaling a qualitative shift toward deeper strategic alignment and institutionalized defense cooperation.

This study delineates the main areas in which the new administration can realistically expand cooperation in line with its strategic priorities including defence systems and planning, mitigation of emerging risks in cyber, intelligence collaborations , space , nuclear risk and coordinated military exercises.

Literature review:

Scholarly studies on India-US defence cooperation analyze its evolution, institutional structure and strategic rationale, while also assessing its broader impact on regional security. Researchers remain divided on whether this cooperation is driven by convergent national interests or represents an assertion of US hegemonic power in South Asia. The existing scholarship documents a significant shift in India-US defence relations, evolving from marginal cooperation during the cold war to an expanded and institutionalised strategic partnership after 1991. US Former President Bill Clinton's visit to New Delhi in 2000 played a key role in the ongoing expansion of strategic and defence cooperation between the India and the US. Indian former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and US president through their meeting established the foundations of a sustained and cooperative strategic relationship between India and the United States.

Policymakers formalised a agreement to consolidate the strategic partnership, emphasizing common interests and cooperative responsibility in addressing challenges to both regional and global security.

In 2001, President George W. Bush officially indicates China as a Strategic competitor rather than a strategic partner, within this context, Scholars note that the United States supported India's emergence as a regional power in South Asia, reflecting broader concerns about China's future strategic trajectory. Some analysts argued that China's strategic rise has been a key factor for contributing to the increasing stability and depth of defence cooperation between India and the United States. However, this interpretation has been contested by senior U.S officials. Former U.S Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and former CIA Director Porter Goss explicitly rejected the view that China's growing power was the primary driver behind the intensification of India-US defence relations, emphasizing instead broader strategic and institutional considerations.

Scholars such as Ganguly, Tellis and Mohan argue that defence cooperation has become a central pillar of bilateral relations, driven by converging strategic interests, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. According to official statements by senior US defence officials, India has emerged as one of the United States most frequent partners in joint military drills, reflecting an unprecedented level of operational interoperability. The literature traces the origins of this cooperation to the Indo-US naval exercise conducted off the Malabar Coast in 1992. Analysts note that India's participation in large-scale multilateral exercises such as the US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) since 2014. The initiation of the Tiger Triumph tri-service exercise in 2019 and US participation in India-hosted exercises such as

Milan(2022) are viewed as milestones in deepening joint operational planning across land, air and naval domains.

However, critical scholars interpret these developments differently. Realist and critical political economy perspectives contend that expanding joint exercises - such as Yudh Abhyas, Cope India and Vajra Prahar serve broader US strategic objectives, including power projection and containment of rival states, particularly China. From this viewpoint, India's growing military interoperability with the United States may contribute to heightened regional insecurity and reinforce perceptions of American hegemonic influence in South Asia.

Thus, the literature remains divided between those who frame defence cooperation as mutually beneficial strategic alignment and those who view it as a mechanism of asymmetric power and regional destabilization.

Research methodology :

This study adopts an interpretative and critical research methodology to analyze the nature and implications of India-US defence cooperation in the contemporary geopolitical landscape of South Asia. This approach allows an analytical depth and ensuring academic rigor of underlying power structures , policy intentions , and strategic consequences beyond surface-level cooperation.

The research relies exclusively on secondary source of data , as primary data in the field of defence and strategic affairs is often restricted and classified. Data is gathered from a Official government sources form the foundation of the study and include defence policy documents , bilateral agreements, strategic frameworks, joint military statements and official speeches issued by Indian and US authorities . These sources provide authoritative insights into formal policy positions and institutional objectives.

Academics literature forms the second major pillar of data collection. Data has been collected from a peer-reviewes journals, scholarly books , and policy-oriented research related to defence diplomacy , alliance politics , hegemonic power and South Asian security dynamics . Additionally, Indian scholarly perspectives have been incorporated through institutional repositories of doctoral theses and dissertations maintained by Indian universities. A comparative interpretative analysis is undertaken to contrast Indian and American policy perspectives and strategic priorities. This helps in identifying areas of convergence as well as underlying contradictions.

This methodology ensures a balanced, theory -driven and context-sensitive evaluation of India-US defence cooperation , contributing meaningfully to debates on strategic partnerships and hegemonic influence in South Asia.

Objectives

- The study examines the extent to which defence cooperation is motivated by common security concerns and mutual strategic interests.
- The study aims to analyze the historical development of India -US defence ties, notably in the post-cold war period and to assess the strategic objectives driving this partnership.
- It seeks to assess how important defence agreements, cooperative military drills, defence commerce and technology cooperation affect the development of bilateral relations
- To study how this collaboration affects regional security and India's strategic autonomy.
- To examine the strategic motivations of the United States in enhancing bilateral defence relations with India.
- To assess India's foreign policy strategy in reconciling strategic self- reliance and strategic collaboration.

Hypothesis - Based Research Questions

Q1 - How far can the post-Cold War deepening of India-US defence cooperation be attributed to shared regional and global security imperatives?

Q2 - To what extent do defence agreements, joint military exercises , and defence trade contribute to defining the scope and character of India-US defence relations?

Q3 - Does the deepening defence cooperation signify a shift in India's foreign policy from non-alignment to a strategy of multi-alignment?

Statement of Research Hypotheses.

- Rather than US hegemony, India-US defence cooperation is primarily motivated by shared security interest and convergent strategic goals.
- The expanding India-US defence cooperation has a substantial impact on regional security dynamics in South Asia, influencing the balance of power and the extent of India's strategic autonomy.
- The strengthening defence ties between India and the United States reflects an expansion of US strategic influence in South Asia, indicating elements of hegemonic power rather than purely mutual interest.

Conceptual Framework

An assessment of the erosion of autonomy in India's defence policy, from non-alignment to strategic convergence.

India-US relations have traditionally evolved in two distinct phases. The first, marked by non-alignment, encompasses the Cold War years and witnesses limited bilateral cooperation from 1947 until the nuclear tests of 1998. The second shift occurred in the late 1990s when the Clinton administration initiated a policy of engagement, redefining the contours of bilateral relations and opening avenues for deeper strategic. The principal of non-alignment stands as a notable contribution of India to the field of international relations. Shortly after taking office as interim Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru outlined core foreign policy principles that emphasized autonomy and independent decision - making, eventually forming the basis of non-alignment. This policy developed against the backdrop of the post - 1945 global order, marked by growing tensions between two opposing power blocs led to the Cold War - a conflict characterized primarily by diplomatic competition, ideological struggle and strategic pressure rather than direct military engagement.

The central objective of India's policy of non-alignment was to distance the country from great power rivalries while preserving constructive relations with both opposing blocs. Rather than reflecting passive neutrality, non-alignment represented a conscious rejection of alliance politics and military entanglements. Nehru's 1964 statement reflected a deep skepticism toward bloc politics, which he associated with the origins of the world wars and the risk of future large-scale conflict by neither aligning with nor opposing the superpowers, India attempted to carve out a distinct diplomatic space within an increasingly polarized global order. India's articulated its foreign policy objectives as being shaped by historical experience, domestic priorities, international circumstances, and leadership vision.

The role of Kashmir in shaping US strategic engagement.

During the second phase of the Cold war, Kashmir remained a central consideration in US strategic calculations toward India and the region. The United States maintained a strategic ambivalence, strengthening ties with Pakistan through military assistance, material support and diplomatic backing, while remaining cautious in its relations with India. Consequently, the Kashmir issue contributed to recurring tensions in Indo-US relations and became one of the principal obstacles to a fully cooperative bilateral relationship during this era.

India consistently resisted third-party intervention in the Kashmir conflict , maintaining that the issue should be addresses directly between the concerned parties.Pakistan , in contrast , attempted to engage the United States , presenting Kashmir as a disputed region and urging that the issue be resolved with the assistance of external mediation , thereby creating diplomatic pressure on India . During September 1993 , the Clinton administration drew parallels between Kashmir and other conflict zones , and alleging human right abuses in the Indian-administered region and labeling it a key area of instability . The combination of such critical remarks and the US supportive posture toward Pakistan impeded the creation of a stable environment necessary for fostering trust and cooperation between India and the United States. The US consistently leveraged the Kashmir dispute during the Cold War as a strategic instrument to manage India's influence and strengthen Pakistan , thereby sustaining a perceived equilibrium in South Asia .

A shift from Estrangement to Engagement

The leadership of presidents Clinton and Bush played a decisive role in transforming Indo-US relations. This phase reflected a deliberate U.S foreign policy initiative to cultivate closer relations with India as a leading democratic power.The bilateral relationship subsequently achieved several strategic milestones , notably the Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement , expanded defence and security cooperation , strengthened military ties , increased economic exchanges , and closer coordination on global political challenges . The U.S viewed India as a future economic and military 'Super power ' in South Asia , with a shared interest in regional stability and peace . Within this framework , India is often perceived as a potential regional security provider , capable of contributing to order through cooperative and non-coercive means.

President Bill Clinton's trip to India in March 2000 can be considered the first milestone in Indo - US ties . This was crucial because , after 22 years , the US president traveled to India and marked a significant shift in US policy . This shift stemmed from a combination of factors , including the tacit acknowledgment of India's nuclear status , appreciation of its economic reforms and recognition of its role as a key regional power and stabilizing actor in the Indian Ocean region . The visit also indicated a broader transformation in bilateral perceptions shaped by the post-Cold War strategic environment . During Clinton's five-day tour to India demonstrated his commitment to making India a key partner in South Asia.

The development of a shared vision between India and United States was accompanied by the formulation of several institutionalized initiatives aimed at enhancing bilateral engagement. These included initiatives in democratic governance, health partnerships addressing HIV/AIDS, energy dialogue, agriculture collaboration and disaster management. The successful implementation of these initiatives reflects a growing convergence of interests and underscores the consolidation of a more robust and institutionalized bilateral partnership. This study seeks to analyze the evolution of India-US bilateral relations by examining the challenges and opportunities associated with their deepening engagement. This paper examines an underlying reasons of how two previously distant democracies have, within a decade, developed a strategic partnership driven by evolving political, economic and security interests. The development of this relationship is characterized by the alignment of multiple national interests, resulting in a more integrated and structured bilateral framework. In the early 2000s, the expansion of military-to-military engagement emerged as a key factor in the transformation of Indo-US relations from estrangement to engagement. Despite the expansion of joint exercises, analysts highlight that such interactions may have constrained effectiveness without a parallel emphasis on planning integrated military operations. One perspective proposes the formalization of cooperative military frameworks through a memorandum of understanding on joint operations in the Indian Ocean. However, the strategic implications of such a move could generate unease among Pakistan and China's defence establishments.

As defence engagement between India and United States has intensified, reports suggest that India has compiled a substantial list of desired U.S origin military platform, including P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, PAC-3 missile defence systems, electronic warfare technologies and potentially F-16 fighter aircraft. At the same time, India has articulated a clear preference for a defence partnership centered on technological collaboration, co-development, and indigenous production rather than transactional arms purchase. Despite these objectives, analysts warn that the introduction of missile defence systems in South Asia may have destabilizing consequences, potentially triggering an arms race and altering the region's strategic balance.

The 21st century security order : Balancing cooperation and Defence.

" The United States does not merely believe, as some people may argue, that India is a rising power. We believe that India has already become a significant power. India is

assuming its rightful place in Asia and on the global stage . And we view India's rise as beneficial for the United States and for the world “.

~President Barack Obama

The relationship between the United States and India has become an increasingly important part of the global strategic landscape . This partnership , acknowledged by the U.S President as a defining feature of the 21st century, plays a key role in shaping U.S foreign and defence policies. As India continues to grow in influence as a major regional power and an emerging global player, its significance to U.S long-term strategic interests is likely to increase further.

In recent years, the relationship between the United States and India in the field of defence has significantly changed. It has moved from a limited and exploratory level of interaction to a more structured and strategic partnership. Today, defence cooperation includes a wide range of activities such as regular discussions between institutions, joint military drills, purchasing defence equipment, exchanges between personnel, and collaboration in the development of weapons and technology. These efforts have been guided by a long-term strategy that emphasizes building trust and strengthening institutions. The deep level of military collaboration that has emerged shows how the strategic interests of both countries are becoming more aligned. The New Framework Agreement signed in 2005 forms the foundation for U.S.-India defence cooperation, establishing formal processes for bilateral work. The Defence Policy Group (DPG), which is led by high-ranking defence officials from both nations, plays a key role in this structure. In 2011, the DPG identified maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and counter-terrorism as the main areas for cooperation.

India - U.S agreed to :

1. Expand collaboration on missile defence.
2. Enhance intelligence exchange.
3. Promote regional and global peace and stability.
4. Strengthen military capabilities.
5. To improve security and defeat terrorism.

India's defence sector is experiencing a transformative phase characterized by substantial modernization efforts . Projections indicate that by 2025 , the country may allocate nearly \$200 billion toward the acquisition of defence equipment . This trajectory builds on its earlier status as the leading global arms importer between 2007 to 2011 period , accounting for

approximately one-tenth of global arms imports . India's high defence import rate highlights the country's incapacity to develop its own defences , leading to significant acquisition from foreign suppliers.

Four major powers currently define the strategic architecture of the Asia-Pacific region : the United States and Japan as established industrialized states and China and India as rapidly ascending powers. These states constitute two overlapping strategic triangles - the long-standing Sino-U.S - Japan triangle and the emerging U.S -China-India triangle . Both triangles are marked by asymmetrical power relations and divergent strategic interests . Significantly , United States maintains stable and cooperative relations with Japan and India , enabling it to occupy a relatively advantageous and stabilizing position within both triangular relationships. Scholars suggest that US-China-India relations could shape Asian events in the 21st century.

Teresita C. Schaffer highlights the growing alignment of India and US strategic interests as a critical variable shaping future bilateral relations in Asia . While differences over nuclear policy persist , they coexist with substantial alignment in areas such as Indian ocean security and opposition to hegemonic dominance in Asia . These shared strategic objectives offer a strong empirical basis for expanding security cooperation , reinforcing the role of both countries as central actors in shaping the regional security architecture .

The US - India relationship has evolved significantly over the past fifteen years , moving beyond cautious and largely unproductive interactions toward a robust bilateral framework grounded in shared strategic objectives . What once consisted of cautious diplomatic interactions has evolved into a comprehensive partnership shaped by overlapping strategic , economic and security interests . Whereas earlier characterizations emphasized the paradox of shared democratic values amid political distance described as "estranged democracies" the contemporary relationship is increasingly defined by institutionalized cooperation . The contemporary framing of the relationship as a strategic partnership is supported by sustained growth in defence collaboration , economic ties and policy coordination .

India -US bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation : An established 2+2 dialogue framework.

1. President Trump and Prime Minister launched another significant initiative by holding the 2+2 dialogue between India's External Affairs Minister and Defence Minister and their U.S counterparts . The first dialogue of this kind took place on September 6, 2018, with India's

Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, and Minister of Defence, Nirmala Sitharaman, joining Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis from the United States. The talks focused on bilateral efforts to combat terrorism, including the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2396, which addresses the return of foreign terrorist fighters. Both sides also pledged to strengthen their cooperation in multilateral organizations like the UN and FATF. They reaffirmed their commitment to working together to maintain a secure cyberspace and prevent cyber-attacks.

2. The second 2+2 Dialogue occurred on December 9, 2019. On behalf of the United States, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper participated. From the Indian side, Minister of Defence Rajnath Singh and Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar represented the country. Discussions focused on bilateral efforts related to counter-terrorism. The Indian ministers expressed appreciation for the U.S. support at the United Nations in designating terrorist groups originating from Pakistan. They also acknowledged the U.S. backing for the designation of terrorist organizations, including the leadership of Jaishankar Militant Group (JeM) by Masood Azhar. The United States welcomed recent changes in Indian law that could enhance cooperation on terrorism designations. Considering the judicial collaboration between the National Judicial Academy in Bhopal, India, and the U.S. Federal Judicial Center, the ministers agreed to strengthen cooperation in new areas and conduct joint judicial workshops for third-country partners.

3. The third 2+2 Dialogue occurred on October 27, 2020. The U.S. Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo, and the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Dr. Mark T. Esper, participated on behalf of the United States. They were joined by India's Minister of Defence, Rajnath Singh, and India's Minister of External Affairs, Dr. S. Jaishankar. The Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership between India and the United States, which was developed during President Donald J. Trump's visit to India in February 2020, was welcomed. While acknowledging the actions taken in previous dialogues, support was reaffirmed for the early adoption of a United Nations Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT). This agreement would contribute to the advancement and strengthening of the global framework for counter-terrorism cooperation, as well as reaffirm the message that no cause or grievance can justify the employment of terrorist tactics.

4. The fourth 2+2 Dialogue occurred on April 11, 2022. The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, and Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin, represented the United States, alongside India's Minister of Defence, Rajnath Singh, and Minister of External Affairs, Dr. S. Jaishankar. During the meeting, the participants emphasized the commitments and decisions made in earlier dialogues. In keeping with the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) guidelines , they emphasized the need to uphold international norms pertaining to anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism. In order to improve and fortify the international framework for cooperation, the ministers also stated their support for the early implementation of a United Nations Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT). They reiterated that the use of terrorism cannot be justified by any cause or grievance.

Analysis and Discussion:

The findings of this study show that India-US defence cooperation in the post-Cold War era represents a complex interplay between strategic alignment and the expansion of American power in South Asia. Rather than being a simple case of hegemonic dominance or uncritical alignment, the partnership has developed through multiple institutional mechanisms formed by common security concerns, altering regional power dynamics , and India's rebalanced foreign policy strategy. The rise of defence cooperation must be seen within the larger restructuring of the international order and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a central geopolitical theatre.

The analysis shows that developing bilateral defence ties has been significantly influenced by similar perceptions of security challenges , especially China's growing military and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific and along the Sino-Indian border . A convergence of strategic objectives is demonstrated by initiatives like intelligence sharing , defence technology cooperation , joint military drills , and the institutionalization of the 2+2 dialogue framework . These developments bolster the claim that collaboration is motivated by India's own assessment of regional security imperatives as well as its desire to improve military capabilities and global strategic relevance , rather than just being imposed by U.S. power asymmetry.

From a critical standpoint, the growing scope of U.S.-India defence cooperation adds to perceptions of American hegemonic power in South Asia. Expanded joint exercises, missile defence negotiations, and maritime security initiatives may change regional power dynamics and heighten strategic concerns among neighbouring countries , particularly China and Pakistan . The incorporation of India into US-led security architectures like the QUAD

underscores the perception that the cooperation is consistent with the US's broader goals of retaining regional supremacy and defining Asia's evolving security order .

The discussion emphasizes that the alliance should be viewed as a negotiated strategic relationship molded by mutual interests , institutional restrictions , and shifting regional realities , rather than as a zero-sum product of hegemonic power

Conclusion :

This study investigated India-US defense cooperation as an empirically grounded example of strategic interaction affected by structural transformations in the post-Cold War international system. The data reveals that the alliance has evolved through a sustained process of institutional deepening rather than an abrupt realignment, reflecting both nations' deliberate policy choices in response to changing regional and global security challenges. Since the early 2000, the relationship has grown beyond symbolic engagement toward operational and institutional consolidation, as evidenced by quantifiable increases in defence trade , the frequency of joint military exercises, intelligence exchanges and formalized dialogue mechanisms.

From a data-driven perspective the steady increase in U.S. origin defence platforms in India's military inventory , the growing number of bilateral and multilateral exercises and the repeated renewal of long-term defence frameworks demonstrate sustained political commitment across successive administrations in both countries. Despite differences in leadership style and language , the continuity of basic strategic objectives across the Obama and Trump administrations confirms the notion that India-US defence cooperation is based on long-term structural interests rather than short-term policy preferences . These tendencies lend credence to the thesis that common threat perceptions particularly in terms of maritime security , technological competition and China's rising military capabilities have served as key drivers of cooperation .

At the same time , the analysis demonstrates that this growing collaboration has asymmetrical dimensions that require careful consideration . The United States has a structural advantage as a leading defence technology provider and agenda-setter in evolving Indo-Pacific security frameworks . India's increased interoperability with US forces and integration into US - supported strategic platforms may improve its military performance , but it also creates dependencies in sophisticated technology , logistics and intelligence . Empirically , this raises concerns regarding India's long-term defence indigenization aspirations and strategic decision-making autonomy .

Regionally , the findings show that increased India-US defence cooperation has contributed to noticeable changes in South Asia's security environment. Expanded joint drills. missile defence discussions and maritime coordination have shifted threat perceptions among surrounding countries , particularly China and Pakistan , with possible implications for regional stability and arms rivalry . These findings provide some support to critical interpretations that see the alliance as strengthening characteristics of American strategic dominance , even when presented in terms of shared security and partnership .

Overall , the study concludes that India- US defence cooperation is best understood as a strategically negotiated alliance that operates within asymmetric power frameworks . It shows a confluence of interests driven by empirical security imperatives , while also reflecting the broader projection of US power in the region . The ability of India to translate cooperation into domestic capability development while managing regional sensitivities and safeguarding strategic autonomy will be critical to the partnerships's long-term viability . This finding contributes to a more evidence -based and nuanced understanding of modern South Asian strategic partnerships , as well as the changing nature of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

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