



PAPER

Working

JAPANESE ISLAND GEOPOLITICS

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Pekka Korhonen

This paper starts from a specific wonderment at the rapid changes in China-Japan relations. In the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami (東日本大震災), which hit at 11 March 2011 at 14:46(JST), the Chinese government, municipalities, the Chinese Red Cross, and private citizens have sent various forms of help to Japan: a 15 member rescue team, 20,000 tons of gasoline and other fuels, 360 million yen (€3,024,000) worth of materials and equipment, and 72 million yen (€604,800) in monetary donations.¹ Altogether 142 countries and 39 international organizations have sent various kinds of help to Japan, including even such small states as Afghanistan or Samoa.² The biggest helper has been the United States, which has donated c. 8,000 soldiers, 144 rescue workers, 10 technical advisors, 12 rescue dogs, 150 tons of materials and equipment, and monetary relief donations of over 4900 million yen (€41,160,000). The government of Prime Minister Kan Naoto (菅直人) has shown special gratitude especially towards China, apparently using the occasion for a diplomatic manoeuvre to heal relations. At least the marked utilization of diplomatic protocol points to that; the State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Takahashi Chiaki (高橋千秋) was sent to the airport to greet the Chinese – and South Korean – rescue teams, but no other teams were greeted in his way. In 10 April Prime Minister Kan sent as his special envoy Sasamori Kiyoshi to Beijing to thank Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (温家宝) for Chinese help, followed in 12 April with a phone call by the prime minister himself to the Chinese president. In contrast, Kan only phoned once to President Barrack Obama, and of course thanked Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she visited Japan in 17 April. Critics have called this conduct “Like-China/shun-America” (亲中疎米) policy.³ Another name for this new China-Japan relationship is “earthquake diplomacy” (震災外交), accompanied by doubting comments in the United States⁴, but favourable ones in China, with hopes that this situation would last.⁵

However, when we go back in time just a little further from 11 March 2011 at 14:46, we enter a totally different mood, that of high tension with China. For instance, in 11 March 2011 at 11:43 (JST) the Japanese Asahi Shimbun reported that a Chinese patrol ship had once again, and the third time that month, been intruding in Japanese territorial waters at the southwestern end of the archipelago.⁶ The

* The editor has technically dealt with some Japanese words and some notes in the original paper.

¹ 東日本大震災 海外支援まとめ <http://wikiwiki.jp/h4j/23.4.2011>

² 諸外国等からの支援申し入れについて (平成 23 年 4 月 20 日) http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/23/4/0420_04.html 23.4.2011.

³ <http://www.zakzak.co.jp/society/politics/news/20110419/plt1104191149000---n1.htm>, 23.4.2011.

⁴ <http://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/hl?a=20110420---00000001---rcdc---cn>, 23.4.2011.

⁵ Lian Degui, Earthquake Diplomacy: a Potential Turning Point in Regional Relations, April 1, 2011.

<http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace---security/earthquake---diplomacy---a---potential---turning---point---in---regional---relations/>, 23.4.2011.

⁶ 尖閣周辺にまた中国監視船 今月 3 回目、海保が警告, <http://www.asahi.com/special/senkaku/TKY201103110190.html>

issue was ostensibly about the Senkaku Shotō/Diaoyudǎo jīqí fúshǔdǎoyǔ/Diaoyutai Qundǎo/Pinnacle Islands (尖閣諸島/钓鱼岛及其附属岛屿/钓鱼台列屿); The various names imply that they are effectively under Japanese administrative control, but claimed by both China and Taiwan. The starting point of the current row was when in 7 September 2010 the Chinese trawler Minjinyu 5179 rammed two Japanese coast guard vessels, leading to the arrest of the captain and crew. This then rapidly escalated into a major international clash, involving demonstrations both in China and in Japan, and temporary “unofficial” Chinese restrictions on the export of rare earth metals to Japan.⁷ The Japanese government backed down and released the Chinese fishermen without prosecuting them. That, however, did not end the nationalist agitation in Japan, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Millions of viewers have watched the various versions of the incident in YouTube⁸, making interpretations of the events according to their respective nationalities.⁹

The usual interpretation of the dispute used to be that it involved minerals, oil and gas in the seabed of the hundreds of square kilometers of territorial waters. During winter 2010-11 emphasis has been more on fishermen and coast guards as personal national representatives, probably because of visual media like YouTube. Individuals emotionalize territorial issues much more effectively than mineral extracting companies or scientific surveillance vessels. Classical Ratzelian geopolitics can be used as a theoretical aid here. Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), the German father of geopolitical theory, created a botanical understanding of national space, in the sense that there is a tendency for national borders to expand to areas where members of the national “species” conduct their life activities:

*Wo die Verbreitung einer Lebensform Halt macht, liegt ihre Grenze [...] Die Grenze als Peripherie eines Volkes gehört dem Volk. [...] Die Grenze ist also immer ihrem Wesen nach eranderlich.*¹⁰

Ratzel’s language depicts a situation where a nation sends its members outwards as if it was a natural process, just like a tree would send its seeds to spread in wind to new soils. There is, however, no need to read Ratzel in this kind of simple naturalistic way, which has been amply criticized and ridiculed many times over,¹¹ we can also see him as an interpreter of nationalistic psychology. His point is that the state is not the only geopolitical actor; essentially all citizens and their organizations participate in geopolitics, which tends to electrify territorial issues. States of course are deeply involved in all this, but individual activity is crucial in setting the dynamics in motion, because people can readily identify with other

⁷ Ming Hwa Ting, China and the supply chain of rare metals: Table of [dis]contents November 11th, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/11/11/china---and---the---supply-chain-of-rare-metals-table-of-discontents/>. 25.4.2011.

⁸ 尖閣ビデオが流出か 中国漁船が衝突の映像 Senkaku, <http://youtu.be/sVVM2AmvD5U>. 25.4.2011

⁹ Gavan McCormack, Small Islands – Big Problem: Senkaku/Diaoyu and the Weight of History and Geography in China--- Japan Relations, The Asia—Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 1 No 1, January 3, 2011. <http://www.japanfocus.org/---Gavan---McCormack/3464>, 25.4.2011.

¹⁰ “Where the spreading of a life form ends, lies its border. The border as the periphery of a people belongs to the people. In its essence, a border is thus always changing”; Ratzel, Friedrich. 1899 [1882]. Anthropogeographie. Erster Teil, Gründzüge der Anwendung der Erdkunde auf die Geschichte. Stuttgart: Verlag von J. Engelhorn, 259-260.

¹¹ See, e.g., G. O Tuathail, Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press and London: Routledge, 1996.

individuals.

It is difficult to say how many geopolitical actors there are in China; the government, the nationalistic demonstrators, probably the PLA, and Chinese fishermen. Similar incidents are taking place also in South Korean waters; a collision of a Chinese fishing boat with a Korean Coast Guard vessel took place in 18 December 2010 near Eocheong Island. In the whole affair participated perhaps 50 Chinese fishing boats and several Korean patrol ships, and it involved physical fights with water cannons, steel bars and batons. The incident resulted in an overturned fishing boat, two Chinese dead and a third missing, and various physical injuries for the Koreans coast guards.¹² Four Chinese were arrested, but freed without prosecution after a diplomatic row between the Chinese and Korean states. The incident was quite similar with the Chinese/Japanese clash in the sense that Chinese sailors seemed to be the aggressive players, and the Chinese state readily came to the rescue of its nationals. The difference is that although the injuries on both sides were much more serious, much less resulted in the form of nationalistic tensions. International media hardly recognized the incident.

On the Japanese side also the municipalities seem to be actors, in addition to fishermen and the state. In December the Okinawan city of Ishigaki, which formally administers the islands, declared 14 January to be a commemorative day for the incorporation of the islands into the Japanese empire 116 years earlier. In this action it followed Shimane Prefectural Assembly, which in 2005 declared a similar "Takeshima Day" for the honour of incorporating the Dokdo/Takeshima/Liancourt Rocs (独岛/竹岛) into Japanese territory. A few days ago, in 20 April 2011, the Naha Court of Justice issued an arrest warrant for the Chinese captain of Minjinyu 5179, calling for his prosecution in Okinawa, apparently in defiance of the Japanese central administration's present goodwill policy towards China.¹³ Local interests involving fishermen seem to be heavily behind this kind of local decisions.¹⁴ Anyway, on both sides, fishermen and local administrative actors attempt to act at the border area, and take the geopolitical initiative in their hands.

The Japanese state is wavering in its foreign policy, while the Chinese state appears more resolute. This may reflect different phases in their economic expansionary dynamics, with China still growing rapidly, with a speed of roughly 10% during the past months.¹⁵ In Japan's case one has to go back to the early 1970s to find the same kind of growth rates, and the days of the Japanese economic superpower (经济大国日本) are long gone. The last Japanese prime minister who was able to unabashedly present Japan as a great power in the Asian context was Koizumi Junichiro. In 2002 he could still proudly proclaim that.....¹⁶ All other Asian countries, including China, appeared as small players. He could as the leader of

¹² <http://jp.reuters.com/article/topNews/idJPJAPAN---18696320101219>, 25.4.2011.

¹³ <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/news/110420/plc11042003370006---n1.htm>, 25.4.2011.

¹⁴ McCormack 2011.

¹⁵ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/china/gdp---growth>, 26.4.2011

¹⁶ "Japan occupies 60% of Asian econmy"; Koizumi Junichiro (2002a)

a rich and mighty country lecture them on democracy, human rights and market economy, remind China about the necessity to obey international rules, and ASEAN about economic reform. Koizumi also proposed to (walk as friends, proceed as friends) with East Asian countries. This was explicit great power rhetoric. Friendship as a contractual textual element has traditionally been used in treaties made by great powers. It used to be a systematic European practice after the Westfalen state system was set up. Evgeny Roshchin has showed that the tradition still continues, especially in the diplomatic vocabulary of traditional big powers, such as Britain, France, the United States, and Russia.¹⁷ Japanese diplomatic language belongs to this same larger European tradition.

After Koizumi, no Japanese policy maker has been able to speak from such a position of strength. Especially in 2010 the public atmosphere was rather defeatist in Japan, as China passed Japan, becoming the second largest economy in the world. This was depicted as a contrast of China growing annually by



10%, Japan by 0%, coupled with problems of the aging society, contracting demography, and the rotten state of universities. Even Toyota crashed into quality problems in 2010. In the context of the islands dispute, this lead into depicting China as an imperialistic power (中国帝国主义). Imperialist is of course a title of honour. It is used only towards mighty states. The Chinese used to accuse Japan of imperialism for several decades

even after World War II. The tables have turned also in respect to this title.

Because big powers are by definition geopolitical actors, Chinese military strategy has also emerged as an interpretation for the island dispute. It is now argued that the whole Ryūkyū island chain appears from the Chinese strategic perspective as a barrier. Katsumata Hidemichi, an editor of Yomiuri Shimbun, argues that the PLA has drawn two maritime defense lines; an inner one from the Philippines to Kyūshū, and an outer one from Saipan and Guam to Ogasawara Islands. The Ryūkyū island chain, with Japanese and American military presence there, simply stands in the way. Gavan McCormack also points out that China needs open access to international waters. Passage through the Ryūkyū islands is not a problem in peace time, but the point is that Japan – and the United States – control it.¹⁸

Thus the picture painted in this strategic interpretation is much larger than in the case of the fishermen. It also opens up the issue of the legitimacy of Japanese conquests since the late nineteenth century. Historical Japan consisted of the islands of Honshū, Shikoku and Kyūshū; borders around this core were

<http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/koizumispeech/2002/04/12boao.html>

¹⁷ Roshchin, Evgeny (2009) Friendship in international Relations. A History of the Concept, doctoral dissertation, Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä; (2010) 'Friendship of the Enemies: the strange case of Great Britain and the USSR'. Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention 2010, New Orleans, 17---20 February 2010

¹⁸ McCormack 2011.

hazy, as usual in classical imperial understanding of political space.¹⁹ Immediately after Japan began to be rebuilt as a European style modern nation state, sharply defined national borders were delineated, typically by expanding as far outwards as possible. The island of Ezo (虾夷) in the north was taken already in 1854 under direct administration of the shogunate, and with Russia was agreed that the small islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and Habomai group belonged territorially to Ezo. In 1869 the name was changed to Hokkaidō (北海道). The dual allegiance of Tsushima/Taemado (对马/ 对马岛) to Japan and Korea was ended stepwise in the 1870s, finalized by gunboats in 1876. In the same year, Ogasawara islands in the south were formally annexed to Japanese national territory. At the southwestern end, the Kingdom of Ryūkyū/Liúqiu (琉球王国) was annexed in 1872; in 1879 its suzerainty to China was formally ended, and it was turned into the Okinawa prefecture (沖縄县).²⁰ This territorial expansion was possible because the Japanese learned quickly to employ European diplomatic language; a distinct advantage especially with Korea and China.²¹ If we use the metaphor of religion to understand nationalism, this area could perhaps be said to constitute in present Japan “holy” national territory, which is non-negotiable. Other states do not view the situation in this way. The Russian President Dmitry Medvedev rather pointedly visited Kunashiri island in 1 November 2010, underlining its current status as Russian territory.²² There are newspaper reports that the issue of Okinawa’s belonging to Japan is being challenged in Chinese discussion.²³ Similarly, the status of Tsushima is being challenged in Korea.²⁴ These challenges are not official state foreign policy, just domestic discussion, but anyway create in Japan the impression that the smaller island disputes signify outer defense lines against these potentially bigger territorial challenges with Korea and China. Russia does not appear to be a threat, only an irritant; Russia is not expansionary outside of the former borders of the Soviet Union, and I have never heard of any Russian claims to Hokkaido.

For most ills of the present world, the ultimate culprit is the United States. It has been the most powerful nation state roughly for a century now, and especially during the past 60-70 years it has been the strongest actor in shaping world’s institutions, norms and forms of interaction. The world role of the US spreads also to its companies. For instance, one explanation for the Fukushima No 1 nuclear power

¹⁹ Thongchai Winichakul (1994) *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo—body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

²⁰ Pekka Korhonen (1990) ‘Japanin ekspansio 1854---1945 ja nationalismin nousu lantisen Tyynenmeren alueella’, *Rauhantutkimus* (6)3, 34---67.

²¹ Dudden, Alexis (2005) *Japan’s Colonization of Korea. Discourse and Power*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

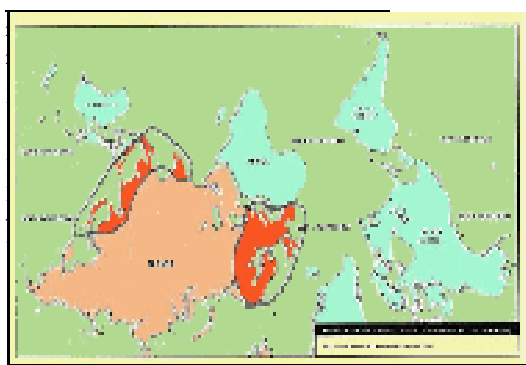
²² The visit was discussed recently, e.g., by the Russian commentator Georgy Toloraya <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/03/16/no-way-not-for-japan-kuril-islands-fracture-in-russo-japanese-relations/#more-18010> and Japanese commentator Tsuneo Akaha <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/02/23/russia-japan-territorial-disputes-divisive-as-ever/#more-17593>, but both articles have curiously become inaccessible at the pages of East Asia Forum. 29.4.2011.

²³ Kosuke Takahashi: China scholars enter Okinawa fray, *Asia Times online*, Oct 23, 2010, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/LJ23Dh01.html>, 29.4.2011.

²⁴ Maya Kaneko: Tsushima’s S. Koreans: guests or guerrillas?, *The Japan Times Online*, March 5, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20100305f1.html>, 29.4.2011.

plant disaster is that the design was made by General Electric Co., not Japanese companies.²⁵ Similarly, the United States can be argued also as the culprit to the present territorial disputes with Japan and its neighbors. The decisive document defining the present Japanese national territory is the San Francisco Peace Treaty signed in 1951.²⁶ The Soviet Union, neither of the Koreas, and neither of the Chinas were invited into the conference, nor were they signatories. The conspicuous characteristic of the treaty's article 2 is that Japanese territory has not at all been defined in it. Mark Selden points out that in the 18 drafts that preceded the final text, the delineation of specific Japanese boundaries was handled in various ways, but in the final text all these issues were left hazy. This reflected changing American geopolitical interests towards Japan, which during 1945-51 changed from a defeated enemy to an ally in the Cold War. A polite interpretation of the omission is that the boundaries were cordially left for Japan itself to negotiate with its neighbors. A sinister interpretation is that with the boundaries left unspecified, the United States guaranteed that Japan would have continuous territorial conflict with its neighbors, and would have to rely on American support to defend itself in these disputes for a long time to come.²⁷

Be that as it may, the outcome has been exactly like that. The short story of the Democratic Party of Japan (民主党) in government is illuminating. It was built on the ruins of several former opposition parties in 1998, and finally in 2009 it was able to defeat in elections the Liberal Democratic Party (自民党), which had ruled almost continuously since 1955. DPJ came into power with a mildly anti-American and openly pro-Asian foreign political agenda, including relocation of the American Futenma airbase in Okinawa, and creation of an East Asian Community with a common Asian currency. Especially the DPJ leader, Hatoyama Yukio (鳩山由紀夫) in his election campaign advocated a European style of regional peace through regional integration,²⁸ and as the first DPJ Prime Minister, attempted to carry through this kind of foreign policy. He lasted less than a year in the post, from 16 September 2009 to 2 June 2010 only—following in this his LDP short-term predecessors, and having been forced to backtrack in practically all of his foreign political agenda. When his successor Kan Naoto's government faced the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute in September, they quickly moved the bilateral issue to a level involving the United States, getting from the United States assurance that the dispute could be interpreted under the US-Japan Security Treaty, which authorizes the United States to protect Japan against an armed attack. In other words, Japan quickly reactivated its client status to the United States, and the early DPJ policy of Sino-Japanese friendship was a thing of the past within a couple of weeks after the beginning of the



126.html 30.4.2011.

ocuments.org/sanfrancisco01.htm, 30.4.2011

kdo, Korea---Japan Colonial Legacy and the United States, The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, us.org/---Mark---Selden/3520,

globalization. The likely next prime minister outlines his hopes for a more Asia-focused 09, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/0819/p09s07---coop.html>.

dispute.²⁹ At least here it looks as if a territorial issue was able to rapidly override all the mutual benefits that peaceful Sino-Japanese friendship and partial integration could bring with it.

At present the territorial problem has been wiped below the carpet. The Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami has changed the public topic of discussion, and China is being given higher diplomatic honour than the United States. Japan clearly has a serious long-term foreign political dilemma, which it seems unable to solve. Short-term government after government is carried away by events. There is a strong temptation to substantially increase multilevel integration with neighbours in East Asia, and diminish dependence on the United States – although certainly not to end it. What seems to be certain is that an independent great power position is not among the Japanese options, even though it still is the third largest national economy in the world. Attempting it would imply creating a strong nuclear deterrent, and there seems to be little willingness among the population, the administration, the politicians, or the military to do that.³⁰ The costs and dangers involved would greatly outweigh any benefits. This implies that the Japanese have handed the regional great power status to China, and accepted a subordinate position. To this points out also the fact that the Japanese allow the Chinese to interfere with their domestic politics, at least in regard with the Yasukuni shrine (靖国神社) issue. After Koizumi, no Japanese prime minister has visited the place, as these visits became constructed in the national and international debates as a symbol for Japanese pride of their World War II empire. Yasukuni is a political taboo, and honouring it means that successive Japanese governments have given China the right to control the physical movement of Japanese leadership within Japanese national territory—even though only in regard a very small place. Anyway, symbolically this places Japan into a subordinate position.

The Dutch-American geopolitician Nicholas Spykman suggested in 1944 that American security lies in controlling the Eurasian rimland, because that was where the greatest amount of human, economic, technical, and military resources of humankind were.³¹ His follower the Polish-American Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested in 1997 that the continuation of American supremacy required controlling especially the western and eastern ends of the rimland, because there the concentration of these resources is the greatest.³² Both of these opinions reflects the idea that it is alliances, i.e., the ability to command the resources of a large number of relatively strong states that brings world power. The United States has been and apparently continues to be very successful in this. Europe and in Japan occupy structurally similar positions in the system. There is various criticism against the United States, occasional obstinacy in individual issues, and various attempts at independent action. The EU's common foreign and security policy cannot, however, boast with any great achievements, even though it is mainly

²⁹ McCormack 2011.

³⁰ Llewelyn Hughes (2007) Why Japan Will Not Go Nuclear (Yet). *International and Domestic Constraints on the Nuclearization of Japan*, *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 67–96.

³¹ Nicholas Spykman (1944) *The Geography of the Peace*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.

³² Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Books.

concentrated on human rights issues,³³ and maintaining European dignity.³⁴ At the same time the EU is gradually moving out of the race for developing next generation weapons systems,³⁵ and except for the French, there has been little interest in acquiring national nuclear weapons production capacities. Japan is in a similar situation; the Japanese leadership and the population alike are very keen on their dignity, and have a tendency to aim for the high moral ground in their foreign policy, but stay aloof from adventurism, especially if it involves a military dimension. This is a logical position for status quo states in relative peace time in alliance with the United States.

China clearly also is a status quo power, only a rapidly expanding one. No other single state is benefiting as much from the current world system as it is. The puzzle of the territorial pressure at the Korean and Japanese maritime borders, and all the way to Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir can perhaps be explained with the idea of status quo politics. It keeps China's southern neighbours wary of China, creating a manageable amount of antagonism. All border issues with Russia have been solved with the 2004 and 2008 agreements, so the phenomenon is not apparent in the north, where mutual relations can be managed within the loose Shanghai Cooperation Organization. A combination of strong economic attraction with low level territorial antagonism is a way to control the political distance between China and its southern neighbours, while it also keeps a number of fishermen and the military occupied, and may also have domestic uses in creating national unity. In terms of foreign policy, it keeps the southern states away from too close and amicable relations with China, prohibiting possibly dangerous integration or alliance formations, which might begin to resemble a real position of power, and possibly cause a serious conflict with the United States. Maintaining China as a single state without any real allies is the best way to guarantee the continuity of the present global status quo, so good to all parties, especially China.

³³ Rosa Balfour: UN Declaration of Human Rights at 60: what role for EU foreign policy? European Policy Centre, Brussels, Policy Brief December 2008,

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital---Library/Publications/Detail/?id=94603&lng=en>, 30.4.2011.

³⁴ Sinikukka Saari: The call for a 'dignified' EU foreign policy, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 18 October 2010,

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital---Library/Publications/Detail/?id=122685&lng=en>, 30.4.2011

³⁵ Marco Wyss: Clashing over Fighters: Winners and Losers, CSS Analysis in Security Policy No. 92, <http://www.sta.ethz.ch/CSS-Analysis-in-Security-Policy/No.-92-Clashing-over-Fighters-Winners-and-Losers-April-2011>, 30.4.2011.

• Shanghai Institute for European Studies (SIES) was founded in May 1993 as a non-governmental academic organization specialized in comprehensive research on politics, economy, society and diplomacy of EU, European states and CIS. SIES is composed of the researchers from institutes and universities, as well as people from non-academic institutions who are interested in European studies.

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