



The Unraveling Bond: Sino-Soviet Relations 1950-1970 as Seen in Korea and Indochina

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Abstract

The early years of the post-World War II era gave rise to a bipolar world that was characterized by an ideological tussle between American-led liberalism and Soviet-driven communism. The ideological battle took place in a practical sense, such as the Korean and Vietnamese Wars, but also in the domain of diplomatic alliance politics. The rise of the People's Republic of China in 1949, led by the Chinese Communist Party, became a new front for the Soviet Union to increase its influence and alliance structure. However, in the ensuing years of the 1950s and 1960s, this seemingly natural ideological alliance soon became strained by differing world views based upon each country's communist ideologies ; Nikita Khrushchev's 'De-Stalinization' efforts, following the death of Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong's revolutionary ideology to deal with issues drove the wedge between the two communist countries. This paper will examine how the variance in communist ideology affected regional conflicts in East Asia and Indochina and broader Sino-Soviet relations from 1950-1970.

Introduction

The defeat of the Axis Powers by the Allied Powers in World War II was undoubtedly the most preeminent shift in the global order until the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. Emerging as the unrivaled superpowers after the Second World War, the United States and USSR, once allies, became bitter and mistrustful enemies following the culmination of the global conflict. The ensuing forty-five years, following 1945, marked a broad diplomatic struggle between liberalism and communism for gains in global alliance structures and ideological influence.^①

On the border of the USSR, a new power emerged that would one day outlast the union itself, – the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeated the Chinese Nationalist Party and obtained power over the country with assistance from the USSR. At the cusp of the CCP victory, a potential problem arose over the invasion of Xinjiang by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. Joseph Stalin, Premier of the USSR, had alerted Mao Zedong, Chairman of the CCP, that the victory in Xinjiang could leave an opportunity for entities hostile to the vision of the CCP to foment the continuation of civil war through social strife. To avoid this problem, Mao requested assistance from Stalin, writing, “We acutely need and hope that you will help us with 30-50 transport aircraft to shift food, clothing, key personnel, and some of the troops.”^② Stalin’s willingness to provide the services requested by Mao was a precedential symbol of the budding Sino-Soviet alliance that would appear under the leadership of Stalin and Mao following the CCP victory of the Nationalist Party later in 1949.

In February of 1950, the USSR and the PRC signed a general agreement that became the basis for the relationship between the two countries: the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. The road to a new alliance was predicated upon the prevailing ideological Marxist beliefs of both the ruling parties of the two countries; as Mao wrote to the Central Committee of the CCP in January 1950, “To sign a new Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance... Sino-Soviet relations will be solidified on the basis of the new treaty; in China, workers, peasants, intellectuals, and the left wing of the national bourgeoisie will be greatly inspired.”^③

The signing of the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance cemented the solidarity of revolutionary Marxist ideological sentiments between the PRC and the USSR. In the eyes of the United States, this breakthrough of ideological influence by the USSR, despite U.S. efforts,^④ legitimized the challenge liberalism faced throughout the world. However, the ensuing fifteen years, fraught with regional turmoil and leadership changes, drove a wedge in what could have been an unbreakable ideological alliance between the USSR and PRC. At the crux of this divergence was the death of Joseph Stalin and the installation of a new Premier of the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev, in 1953, due to different ideological interpretations of Marxist-Leninist theory; as Mao stated, “Khrushchev does not understand Marxism, but is easily duped by imperialism.”^⑤ As time began to pass and regional conflict in East Asia and Indochina developed over the 1950s and 1960s, the ideological split widened, and the Sino-Soviet alliance began to splinter at its core.

^① Thompson, Kenneth “U.S. and U.S.S.R.: Confrontation of Interests”, *Great Decisions*, no. 138 (1959): 40-91.

^② Kraus, Charles. “How Stalin Elevated the Chinese Communist Party to Power in Xinjiang in 1949”, *Wilson Center*, May 11, 2018. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/how-stalin-elevated-the-chinese-communist-party-to-power-xinjiang-1949>

^③ Telegram, Mao Zedong to the Central Committee of the CCP, 2 January 1950.

^④ Westad, Odd Arne. “Losses, Chances, and Myths: The United States and the Creation of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1950”, *Diplomatic History*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997): 105-115.

^⑤ Lüthi, Lorenz. *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008): pg. 151.

As the development of the bipolar world order dragged on, Asia became an increasingly active ground for the ideological battle.^① There were many theaters of the Cold War; however, this research will focus on Sino-Soviet approaches and engagements in Korea and Indochina, specifically in both Laos and Vietnam, to examine the changing nature of the communist alliance between the two countries under different leadership.

Literature Review

Early signs of the Sino-Soviet split began to appear in the period between Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev's transition as Premier of the USSR. The existing literature mainly consists of three dominating schools of thought regarding the erosion of relations between the two countries: national interest, differing Marxist-Leninist ideologies, and domestic politics. A national interest approach, as explained by Robinson,^② suggests that during the period between 1949 and 1959 the USSR and PRC developed increasingly different and conflicting national interests. These interests reflected the two countries' different approaches to settling issues with the United States, the nature of transitioning to socialism, and the influence wielded by each country in Asia. Another issue of contention were nuclear weapons that underpinned security in the post-World War II nuclear era. Based on Morgenthau's primacy of national interests theory,^③ Robinson claims that the possession of nuclear weapons by only one member of the alliance transformed the relationship and led to a shifting position on security strategies between the USSR and the PRC.

Other scholars, such as Shen and Xia,^④ discuss the reasoning behind the rift by identifying Mao's early dissatisfaction with Khrushchev's understanding of Marxist-Leninist theory. As the 1957 Moscow Conference unfolded, Sino-Soviet relations were publicly perceived to have reached a peak of cordiality; however, underlying tensions in the approach to political issues became apparent. Though minor in measurable impact, the declaration signed by the USSR and PRC resulting from the 1957 Moscow Conference became a decisive symbol of the future strategic relationship between the two countries. The desired rhetoric in the resolatory declaration, specifically on the issues of 'peaceful transition' to socialism, was evidence of the ideological divergence between Mao and Khrushchev, Shen and Xia contend; they write, "The CCP, for its part, had gained prestige and influence in since the Twentieth CPSU Congress. Mao believed that he was much more theoretically refined than Khrushchev, and many CCP leaders shared this view."^⑤

Other scholars, such as Luthi,^⑥ further develop the ideological reasoning of the strained relations between Moscow and Beijing in the post-Stalin era. Luthi cites the disagreement over the concept of peaceful coexistence regarding the Second Taiwan Strait crisis and issues pertaining to Khrushchev's willingness to engage U.S. President Eisenhower on nuclear weapons negotiations. At the heart of this divergence was Mao's adoption of the Great Leap Forward, which made

① McMahon, Robert J. "The Cold War in Asia: Toward a New Synthesis?", *Diplomatic History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 307-327.

② Robinson, Thomas, "A National Interest Analysis of Sino-Soviet Relations", *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 11, no. 2 (1967): 135-175.

③ Morgenthau, Hans J. "The Primacy of the National Interest". *The American Scholar*. Volume 18: 207-212.

④ Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, "Hidden Currents during the Honeymoon: Mao, Khrushchev, and the Moscow Conference", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 11, no. 2 (2009): 74-117.

⑤ Shen, Zhihua and Xia, Yafeng, "Hidden Currents during the Honeymoon: Mao, Khrushchev, and the Moscow Conference", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 11, no. 2 (2009): 74-117.

⑥ Luthi, Lorenz, *The Sino Soviet Split*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008): 80-113.

significant, radical developments in the summer of 1957, signifying the Chairman's ideological view of Marxist-Leninist theory as a 'continuous revolution' to thwart imperialist influence in Asia. Scholars, such as Huang,^① identify differences in military cooperation and Asian security, as a means of the broader shifting basis for the deteriorating relationship between the PRC and USSR. In 1958, the USSR and China reached serious disagreement over the ownership rights of naval facilities in China; the USSR desired joint ownership and the PRC sole ownership as the base would be in China. Such subtle frustrations and differences grew into policy differences, as exemplified by the Jinmen Islands and US-Japanese security treaty.

A final strand of literature examines the split of Sino-Soviet relations through a domestic lens. Scholars such as Ringger argue that the PRC's differing policy and attitude towards the USSR resulted from Mao's attempt to shore up political control within China.^② As the PRC began to develop in its first decade of rule, the domestic situation faced by Mao had never been so uncertain. As a result, Mao's turn to the left, through the Great Leap Forward initiative, was to be an anti-right domestic campaign to purge challenges to his authority and bolster his domestic support. As the campaign faced challenges, foreign policy was used as an instrument to quell domestic resistance, which led the foreign policy of the PRC to be even more aggressive than that of the USSR.

Overall, the existing literature provides a plentiful body of work on the broad deterioration of relations on the basis of differences pertaining to ideology and national interests between the USSR and the PRC, especially over issues such as the Second Taiwan Strait, nuclear engagement with the United States, and broader regional Asian conflicts. The research of this paper will seek to examine if "deterioration" of relations based on ideological differences between Khrushchev and Mao led to direct competition between the USSR and the PRC, and its effect on the communist alliance structure, in dealing with developments in Indochina between 1950-1970.

Proposed Question

How did Marxist-Leninist ideological differences in the USSR, under Nikita Khrushchev, and the PRC, under Mao Zedong, influence competition in Sino-Soviet regional Asian policy strategies toward Indochina during the years 1950-1970?

Methodology

The research centered on historical accounts, and the analysis was conducted through a case studies based qualitative approach. By using both primary and secondary sources, the research seeks to compare foreign policy cooperation between the USSR and PRC in the mid-19th century to provide a descriptive analysis. Primary sources will be gathered from digital archives, such as publicly available governmental records and institutes provided by the Wilson Center and United Nations on issues pertaining to the Korean, Vietnamese, and Laotian situations. Secondary sources will stem from available literature that are relevant to the theory of alliance politics, the aforementioned case studies, scholars of the Cold War, Soviet Union, and early periods of the People's Republic of China.

^① Huang, Yuxing, "East Asia: 1955-1965", *China's Asymmetric Statecraft: Alignments, Competitors, and Regional Diplomacy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2023): 56-77.

^② Ringger, Caleb, "The Sino-Soviet Split: A Domestic Ideology Analysis", *Journal of Political and International Studies*, Volume 40 (2023): 107-124.

The case studies will center upon the Korean and Vietnam Wars to examine Sino-Soviet foreign policy interaction, cooperation and competition. The dependent variables, competition or cooperation in Korea and Indochina, will be operationalized by the independent variables of this research, Soviet foreign policy under Nikita Khrushchev and Joseph Stalin, to test the theory of alliance politics and examine if competition became apparent in the relationship between the USSR and the PRC.

Case Studies

The signing of the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance between the USSR and the PRC publicly marked the warmest ties of international communism, appearing to cement the national interests between the two largest communist countries in the world. The agreement of 1950 not only replaced the 1945 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, but also reinvigorated the solidarity between the countries; the 1950 signing marked the first time both China and Russia were fully governed by communist parties. Of the highest importance within the 1950 Treaty, the two countries agreed to mutually defend the other against Japan, as well as any other states who incurred in aggression. This was just the groundwork for the broader agreement, which sought to solidify the international interests of the USSR and PRC to have a coordinated communist approach; “The contracting Parties shall consult together on all important international questions involving common interests of the Soviet Union and China, with a view to strengthening peace and universal security,”^① states the 1950 Treaty.

The cooperation this Treaty sought to increase resided not only on a security premise, but too “to render each other all possible economic assistance and to affect the necessary economic cooperation.”^② A mere four months passed before the new 1950 Friendship treaty was to be fully tested; tensions along the Korean Peninsula had been building over the five years prior to the official start of the war on June 25, 1950.

The outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula was the first challenge to determine the weight of legitimacy each side placed upon the new treaty of friendship. In the early post-World War II years, Joseph Stalin’s attitude toward Korea sought to maintain a balance of power; a divided Korea maintained Soviet strategic policy goals so that the North Koreans remained reliant on Soviet assistance, and in return the USSR could benefit economically with due ease. Moscow’s hesitation over the outbreak of war on the peninsula was far more prolonged compared to the Chinese, evidenced by a 1949 telegram from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gromyko, to General Shtykov; “It was forbidden to you to recommend to the government of North Korea that they carry out active operations against the South Koreans without approval of the Center.”^③

Moscow’s resistance to full-scale military involvement, though military assistance had been rendered to North Korea through the 1945-1950 period, remained so throughout the outbreak of the war. However, North Korea, under the leadership of Kim Il Sung, would not have been able to support warring efforts without not only the Soviet Union, but also that given by the PRC. For

^① Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Conclusion of the “Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance”.

^② Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Conclusion of the “Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance”.

^③ “Background Report on the Korean War,” 9 August 1966, in Kathryn Weathersby, “The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1993), pp. 446.

these efforts to be effective, the USSR and PRC were required to collaborate to possibly strengthen the position of Kim Il Sung on the Korean peninsula.

Bordering the PRC, the issue of the Korean peninsula, especially the issue of the threat of the advancement of the United Nations forces north of the 38th parallel, was of acute concern to the security policy aims of Mao Zedong. The threat of a unified Korea, under the control of the Republic of Korea and backed by the United States, in the view of Mao, was an existential threat to the PRC. Though the ambitiousness of engagement in Korea persisted between Moscow and Beijing, coordination between Stalin and Mao emerged prior to the Chinese intervention. In a cable to Stalin in May of 1950, Soviet Ambassador to the PRC Roshchin wrote relaying Mao's desire for Soviet clarification before proceeding on deliberate actions regarding Korea, "In the conversation with comrade Mao Zedong, the Korean comrades informed about the directives of comrade Filippov... that North Korea can move toward actions. In connection with the abovementioned comrade Mao Zedong would like to have personal clarifications."^①

Mao's ambitions to enter the Korean War were met with reservations by Stalin, but the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, underscored by their common international communist ideals, helped merge the two leaders to ultimately support the other. On the eve of the outbreak of war on June 25, 1950, following Stalin's approval of the North Korean invasion of the south, Stalin flatly rejected Kim Il Sung's request for Soviet military assistance. Stalin wrote in response to Sung's request for ten military advisors to use to administrate the North Korean naval purposes, "Your proposal is rejected. It gives grounds for interference."^② Stalin had postured and conveyed that the Soviet policy would be one that coordinated North Korea's reliance upon the Chinese for military support in the war. Stalin's resolve to refrain from offering military personnel assistance, however, slowly dissolved as the war continued and American involvement began to shift the balance of play. In July of 1950, Kim Il Sung sent an additional request to Stalin soliciting advisors; this time Stalin approved the request, contingent upon the advisors posing as *Pravda* correspondents. On the other hand, in Beijing, Mao became increasingly willing and desirous to support the efforts of North Korea. In light of American victories that had led troops to cross the 38th parallel after the 1st Marine Division landed at Inchon, Mao wrote to Zhou Enlai, who was in Moscow to discuss the Korean conflict with the Soviet, "In summation, we recognize that we should enter the war, we must enter the war; entering the war will have great benefits; the harm inflicted by not enter the war would be great."^③

The Chinese intervention in the war was made without guarantees from the Soviets regarding air support. However, the Chinese entry across the Yalu River changed the way Stalin viewed Soviet policy, not just that of the Korean War but also that regarding China's position in the greater international communist struggle. From the October entry by the PRC into Korea, Soviet military and economic assistance into the PRC rose over the ensuing 5 years;^④ this satisfied and bolstered the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance by demonstrating the commitments made by the Soviet Union to the PRC in time of conflict. Furthermore, Stalin began providing direct military assistance during the war; this provided for military training of

^① Telegram, Nikolai V. Roshchin to Joseph Stalin, 13 May 1950.

^② "Background Report on the Korean War," 9 August 1966, in Kathryn Weathersby, "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1993), pp. 434.

^③ Thomas J. Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams," *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1992): pp. 153.

^④ Huang, Yuxing, "East Asia: 1955-1965", *China's Asymmetric Statecraft: Alignments, Competitors, and Regional Diplomacy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2023): 58.

Chinese troops and air cover and combat operations. The Korean War demonstrates that despite the complicated push-and-pull alliance, ultimately cooperation existed between the USSR and PRC during the years of Mao and Stalin. However, the cracks began to widen as the years advanced and new conflicts emerged in Indochina.

The budding conflicts in Indochina, particularly in Vietnam and Laos from 1955 to 1965, offered additional tests to the relationship between the leadership of the USSR and PRC, based upon the 1950 Treaty of the Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. Of primary concern was the first war in Vietnam. By the start of conflict in Indochina, Nikita Khrushchev had gained power in 1953; his ability to consolidate power within the Soviet Union was challenged by competing domestic and international factions. Khrushchev sought to distance himself from the reign and theme of Stalin. At the Twentieth Party Congress, in 1956, Khrushchev made his opposition to Stalin's tactics and policy priorities public, announcing to the conference of international communist leaders, "Stalin, on the other hand, used extreme methods and mass repressions at a time when the revolution was already victorious, when the Soviet state was strengthened, when the exploiting classes were already liquidated, and Socialist relations were rooted solidly in all phases of the economy... In practice Stalin ignored the norms of party life and trampled on the Leninist principle of collective party leadership".^① As the conflict between the North and South Vietnamese deepened during the 1955-1961 period, domestic factors in the PRC, such as Mao's Great Leap Forward initiative, spurred on a period of continuous revolutionary struggle both internally and externally against "imperialist" influences in China. Meanwhile, Khrushchev's communist variance from Stalinism, through his 'De-Stalinization' efforts anchored by a lack of new international revolutionary enthusiasm, spurred on disagreement over North Vietnam and was used by Mao not only to critique the Soviet engagement in Vietnam, but also to solidify his domestic objectives through revolutionary sympathies of the North Vietnamese.

Furthermore, during the time of the Vietnamese conflict, two other major events took place, exacerbating the tension between Khrushchev and Mao. A Sino-Indian conflict emerged in 1958 and came to a head in 1962; this dispute unveiled the Marxist-Leninist ideological divergence between Mao and Khrushchev. In a 1959 discussion between Khrushchev and Mao, the issue of India was discussed and each side addressed their respective perspectives. A glaring statement made by Mao, which underpinned his general view of Khrushchev's 'De-Stalinization' measures, highlighted his opposition to the Soviet engagement with non-aligned and western powers. Mao said, "You attached to us two labels – the conflict with India was our fault, and that the escape of the Dalai Lama was also our error. We, in turn, attach to you one label time-servers... TASS announcement made all imperialists happy."^② Mao's dissatisfaction with Khrushchev's perspective of communism and the efforts made for international communism were reflected in the sentiments of this conversation and carried over into the Sino-Soviet ideological competition in Vietnam, even as Hanoi publicly sought socialist unity. Nevertheless, despite this public call for unity amongst the socialist countries, Hanoi still used the opportunity to exploit the competition between the USSR and PRC.

The USSR, in the early 1960s, began encouraging Hanoi to engage in peace negotiations with the United States. As Hanoi was a great beneficiary of Soviet aid during this time, the North Vietnamese began appeasing the Soviet desires. However, the PRC stood in opposition to this posture and concluded that it was through the revolutionary struggle that the North Vietnamese

^① Speech, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences, Delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Part of the Soviet Union", Nikita Khrushchev.

^② Minute, Mao Zedong's Talk with Nikita Khrushchev, 2 October 1959.

should continue their aims; Enlai, in a 1968 conversation with Pham Van Dong concerning the matter of negotiations with the United States said, “I said many times last year... negotiations could take place during the war. Comrade Mao Zedong also reminded Comrades Le Duan and Pham Van Dong of negotiating, but from a stronger position.”^① This comment reveals the PRC's position that the North Vietnamese should not yet halt their war efforts and negotiate, but rather continue through war to gain a strengthened negotiating position.

The final study of this research focuses upon the early parts of the civil war in Laos as a spillover effect from the war in Vietnam, and the subsequent responses from the USSR and PRC. In the late 1950s, political factions splintered in Lao between Prince Souvanna Phouma, a right-wing general, and Phoumi Nosavan, the left-wing Pathet Lao. The outbreak of civil war drew the attention of American foreign policy and was quickly engaged by the PRC. In an effort to encourage revolutionary struggle not just in Laos, but also in Vietnam, the PRC began equipping the Pathet Lao forces with weapons and supplies. In 1961, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia called for an expanded Geneva Conference to address the Laos crisis.

During this conference, the Soviet Union had insisted that the Pathet Lao, and advisors from North Vietnam, accept a cease-fire during the conflict. The PRC officials, led by Chen Yi, grew weary of the USSR's attempts to dissuade action in Laos; over the ensuing year, the PRC had urged the Pathet Lao not to cease their fight, so as to negotiate from a position of strength. Throughout 1962, the USSR decided to suspend military, primarily air, assistance to the Pathet Lao. The PRC, made aware of this decision, promptly initiated an inquiry to Moscow regarding this decision. The puzzlement of the PRC is reflected through its policy intentions during a 1962 conversation between Enlai and the President of Laos, Souphanouvong. Enlai stated, “You must be prepared to carry out a struggle within the coalition government. In any case, to increase your own strength is the most important matter. The final settlement will be decided by force.”^② The Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, Kuznetsov, responded in kind to the PRC, noting that the military assistance would negate its international commitments made at the 1961 Geneva Accord.

Conclusion

The 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance was a public display of alliance to the West, but, in reality, the relationship remained complex and ultimately weak enough to create an environment of competition in Indochina over Marxist-Leninist ideological understandings and implementation. As exemplified in the Korean War, Stalin and Mao had difficulties, though ultimately efforts were supported and alignment achieved on policy related to military intervention. Following the death of Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev's ascension as the new leader of the USSR, the foreign policy objectives of the USSR and China became increasingly splintered. Driving this divergence were the ‘De-Stalinization’ efforts that the Khrushchev regime drove throughout the communist world and Mao Zedong's domestic political environment, which allowed him to capitalize on his revolutionary ideology. Mao's communist ideology drove the PRC's engagements and support in Vietnam and Laos to increase China's influence relative to that of the USSR; these ideological aims tried to address security concerns that were of great importance to the PRC in its engagements in Korea and Indochina. Ultimately, the relations of the USSR and PRC were never in true accordance with one another and often in

^① Minute, Zhou Enlai's Talk with Pham Van Dong, 13 April 1968.

^② Zhai Qiang, *China and the Vietnam Wars: 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 104.

open competition; this competition culminated in an open dispute in 1969 as the USSR and PRC entered into a border conflict along the Sino-Soviet border.

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