**THE INFLUENCE OF NATIONAL INTEREST IN THE FOREIGN POLICYOUTCOMES IN MALAYSIA DURING THE MAHATHIR ERA(1981 – 2003)**

Syed Hamid bin S. Jaafar Albar, Phd.

Asia e University

syedhamid.albar@spad.gov.my

Suruhanjaya Pengangkutan Awam Darat (SPAD) Headquarters

Blok D, Platinum Sentral, Jalan Stesen Sentral 2

Kuala Lumpur Sentral

50470 Kuala Lumpur.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper explains the influence of National Interest (NI) in the formulation and execution of Foreign Policy (FP) of Malaysia during the Mahathir era since 1981-2003. Therefore, there is a need to analyse whether NI is the predominant factor influencing the FP of Malaysia and to indicate how strongly the NI and FP are related. However, the soundness of the application of the national interest and related theories are subjected to the degree of universality and flexibility of the changing geopolitical environment. These changing factors will be discussed in this paper via two objectives of study that leads to the establishment of two research questions. Two of the objectives of the study were; first, to indicate that the NI is the predominant factor in influencing the conduct of bilateral relations with other state actors and the participation in the multilateral framework and second, to identify the economic, political, security and societal interests and imperatives of Malaysia’s NI that drove the FP. The study adopted a qualitative methodology to interpret the events and episodes of FP of Malaysia during the Mahathir era. The findings showed that the use of events, objectives, postures, initiatives, strategies and implementation of the FP at the bilateral and multilateral domains on the questions of defence/ security, economic, societal interests and ideological values during Mahathir’s era was grounded by the NI - which went beyond the personality, character, family traits or educational background of Mahathir.

**KEYWORD**

National Interest, Foreign Policy, Political Interest, Economic Interest, Security Interest, Societal Interest, Idiosyncratic, Iconoclastic, ASEAN, United Nations, Realism, World Order Interest, Ideological Interest, Government, Principled, Consistent and Pragmatic

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of the national interest was used in both political analysis and political action. As an analytic tool, it is employed to describe, explain, or evaluate the sources or the adequacy of a nation’s foreign policy. As an instrument of political action, it serves as a means of justifying, denouncing, or proposing policies. Both usages, in other words, refer to what is best for a national society. They also share a tendency to confine the intended meaning to what is best for a nation in foreign affairs (National Interest via <http://www.encyclopedia.com> on 17 July 2015).

Previous literature on the FP of Malaysia suggested that the country’s FP formulation and decision-making to be idiosyncratic / iconoclastic before then fitting Tun Mahathir into the schools of IR theories to suggest that the policy was in line with Realism or Constructivism, or rather he was simply a pragmatist. Besides that, studies also indicated that the formulation of the Foreign Policy (FP) of Malaysia was a reflection of domestic policies in the pursuit of the survival, security and economic development in the external sector. However, the concept of NI, though closely associated with the studies and analysis of FP, is subjected to unending debates and disagreements due to the absence of common or universal definitions. Studies showed that the processes of Malaysia’s FP was primarily driven by leaders and policy elites that make decisions based on what is perceived according to the wants and needs of the country at a particular point of time.

As reflected by Drulak (2010), the criteria of relevance, domestic consensus and external acceptance should be applied in order to identify NI. According to Nuechterlein (1976, p. 248), the NI encompasses the following matters:

1. Defence interests: the protection of the nation-state and its citizens against the threats of physical violence directed from another state and / or an extremely inspired threat to its system of government.
2. Economic interests: the enhancement of the economic well-being of the nation state in relations with other states.
3. World Order interests: the maintenance of an international political and economic system in which the nation state may feel secure and in which its citizens and commerce might operate peacefully outside its borders.
4. Ideological interests: the protection and furtherance of a set of values which the people of a nation-state shared and believed to be universally good.

Within the above stated paradigms, Mahathir as the PM steered the country and crystallized the FP of Malaysia with increasing consciousness of its identity, nationalism, assertiveness and activism underpinned by the political, economic, security and societal interest and imperatives for the survival of the nation, government and its political regime.

1. **A PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE ABOUT NATIONAL INTEREST**

Before we proceed, it would be helpful to understand the philosophical perspective of NI. Fauziah (2006) explains that NI has always been the basis for which a government conducts its FP. The survival of a government is a great deal dependent on how well it is able to gain the support of its citizen to keep it in power; often based on its promises of sufficient food, employment, health care and education. She logically elaborated, when a country engages with the outside world, the promotion of the collective national interest of its citizen takes first priority.

But the equation becomes quite different when a government deals with another party outside its political boundary. Once outside the national boundary, it is a different game altogether. NI takes the precedence in all FP activities. So when we discuss about international relations (IR), it is about FP that is guided by NI. Even though Government are made up of leaders, their personality and personal traits are not the core influencing factor in the FP decision making.

We have witnessed through specific events and incidences that FP is always about the protection of a country’s national interest in which selfishness, deceit, hypocrisy, exploitation, intervention, war, economic suppression and sanctions, pivot initiatives and arms sale are now common practice among nation states. Why plunder the resources of the weak or the like-minded nations?! Clearly, it is an act of FP to secure national interest for the survival of the governments to remain in power. These actions are likened to the Darwinian definition of self determination as survival of the fittest, even if fittest means most adept in the use of force. Domestic politics will always be key determination of country’s NI and design of FP.

The proponents of realism, the principal being Machiavelli (1975), argue that IR must be viewed under the category of power and that the conduct of nations should be guided and judged exclusively by the requirement of NI (Fauziah, 2006). These realist claim that morality and personality is irrelevant in the conduct of FP. According to them, the most notable being Hans Morganthau in his classic work, “Politics Among Nations”, IR is best understood as an autonomous realm of power in which the actions are neither motivated by ethical consideration nor subject to ethical judgement. According to Morganthau (1959), he is not unaware of the existence and relevance of standards other that the political one but as a political realist, he cannot but to subordinate these other standards to the political one. In the Hobbesian view (Aron, 1968), as agreed upon by most realists, we need to abandon the use of moral language altogether when we speak in the international state of nature and confine ourselves to speaking the language of NI. Only in that way can we more likely achieve sensible accommodations.

Let us now turn to Malaysia and examine the business of diplomacy in protecting, promoting and defending our NI. From the realist and constructivist lenses, the FP of Malaysia during the Mahathir era was based on his NI in addressing the issues of being consistent, pragmatic and principled. Therefore, the national geopolitical and strategic will continue to be a powerful tool in identifying the NI and crafting its FP to establish a space in the international arena.

1. **ABOUT THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Many scholars and experts have long been espousing and explaining about Malaysian FP in various perspectives. Some argue that Malaysia’s FP are influenced by strong personality traits, hence the conduct of relations as idiosyncratic / iconoclast. Others explained about the role of leaders and organization in the FP formulation process. However, one can ask several questions why some states or leaders act in certain ways in FP formulation and decision making. What triggers a policy change? Does FP really take into account NI factors in Malaysia?

There is a gap between the FP of Malaysia and some other western nations, notably the US in terms of how both manage the pursuit of their NI. In this globalised and inter-independent world, US as a major power projects its position and its intent on hegemony while Malaysia as a small middle power country can only adhere to its NI proposition to demonstrate that it is an independent and sovereign state.

In this paper, I emphasised that the NI is the predominant factor influencing the conduct of bilateral relations with other state actors and the participation in the multilateral framework. Taking this into consideration, this paper also aims to indicate that during the era of Mahathir (1981-2003), the FP of Malaysia was driven by his sense of NI to secure its economic, political, security and societal interests in a very principled, consistent and mostly pragmatic manner. This could be summarized as follows:

1. To maintain the independence and sovereignty of the country without external interference;
2. To maintain the well being of its citizen as enumerated under Vision 2020 and to be a developed nation based on its own values;
3. To create national identity and integration through unity and harmony of its multi-ethnic, multi cultural and multi religious society;
4. To adhere to the UN Charter as a responsible member of the international community;
5. To maintain friendly inter-state relations with all countries irrespective of political beliefs and ideologies; and
6. To act in principled, consistent and pragmatic manner to achieve the FP objectives.

Mahathir’s FP was creatively crafted to serve NI as defined by his Government. Saravanamuthu (2010) argues that the domestic instrumentality for bringing about this state of affairs was an authoritarian state structure articulating within a capitalist framework. The imaginative construction of new FP positions and strategies did not alter fundamental policies that were laid down during the Razak period.

According to Muhammad Muda (1991), Mahathir relished locking horns with certain countries over various issues despite the political, economical and strategic importance of those countries. Despite so, he always hedged and anchored his FP actions to pragmatism to ensure that the NI of Malaysia was not damaged and jeopardized, but defended and promoted. Istiaq Hussein (2008) asserts that Mahathir had several advantages including his strong personality, his meticulous attention to the details of foreign policy, his government’s economic and social achievements as well as political stability, and the cabinet system of the government which allowed the PM a greater role of foreign affairs.



**Figure 1: Relations between FP and NI in contributing to the Well-Being of Malaysia**

**(Source: Researcher’s Own)**

As shown in the figure above, NI is the principal factor influencing the conduct of bilateral relations with other state actors and the participation in the multilateral framework.The key components of NI in the Mahathir era were: Political Interest, Economic Interest, Security Interest and Societal Interest.

**Political Interest**

The country’s political interests have evidently guided Malaysia’s bilateral and multilateral relations during the Mahathir era. The examples of Mahathir‘s political moves presented were tied to the NI when he continuously talked about the need for a level playing field in the international order. He advocated the need to strengthen ASEAN, and to create the “we” feeling that was lacking in APEC. He believed that it was impossible to bind the APEC members together as they were too widely spread across Asia Pacific and had divergent interests to act in common, though Malaysia in later years took an active part in its deliberations.

It was during this time also that ASEAN was restated as the cornerstone of Malaysia’s FP as its NI dictates it to be so. In this regard, ASEAN has created many dialogue partnerships like the ASEAN + 1, ASEAN + 10, ASEAN + 3 and ASEM with the involvement of all major powers. Malaysia, under the leadership of Mahathir, always participated at the centre of all the decisions making process. The FP of Malaysia has always called for ASEAN to be at the driver’s seat in all ASEAN related forums. At times, Malaysia faced objections on what was seen as its rigid posturing towards the west, even amongst ASEAN members like Singapore and Indonesia. When Mahathir proposed for the creation of EAEG, it was objected by Japan, Korea, US Australia and New Zealand as well as fellow by ASEAN members like Singapore and Indonesia. Mahathir’s justification that EAEG was merely a forum, for economic cooperation like EU and NAFTA in economic and trade cooperation for mutual benefits of the region, did not convince the above mentioned ASEAN member countries. In reality, there was a suspicion due to the exclusion of US, Australia and New Zealand from the forum, it was a Pan Asian agenda for co-prosperity.

The financial crisis of 1997/98 was a good lesson for the region to rely upon - politically to deal and overcome the crisis. After all at this time, there was growing interdependence of nation states in East Asia, and hence all the more reason for them to cooperate and collaborate in attempt to avoid the repeat of the financial crisis and become less dependent on International Organization like IMF and the World Bank. During the crisis for ASEAN, China was a reliable partner and they envisioned that China should be given a more assertive role in the region and the West was not comfortable with such a prospect.

The bilateral relations between Malaysia and China were stronger in the Mahathir’s era, which enhanced the economic cooperation in trade and investment. For Mahathir, he did not see China as a threat and even suggested that China had no history of colonization as the west. Malaysia was pushing for stronger engagement with China and to deepen the political economy collaboration between ASEAN and China.

Further to Malaysia’s call to restructure the UN, the expansion of permanent membership of the SC, the reconfiguration of veto power and restructuring of the financial economic architecture gained tremendous support and respect amongst developing countries. Even though Malaysia was a strong critique of the UN, this did not stop the believe on the importance of the UN and the need for it to be strengthened. The objective was for the UN to become a more effective and balanced body representing the interest of the big and small state alike.

Mahathir also continued with its principled policy on Palestine, Bosnia, Cambodia, Afghanistan and Iraq, much to the dismay and irritation of western powers.

Malaysia’s nationalist, assertive and activist FP illustrated by its policy initiatives during the period of Mahathir was not made at the spur of the moment or being idiosyncratic or he was tearing down old traditions or simply seeking status, though status was achieved for Malaysia. It can be construed as the NI to promote Malaysia’s sovereign and independence in the external environment in term of its political stability and interests.

**Economic Interest**

The activist role and the visionary steps taken could be benchmarked with Malaysia’s NI as it achieved economic development and growth. Steadily, Mahathir took new and bolder initiatives, whilst at the same time balancing the imperatives of political, economic, societal interest of Malaysia. Some scholars suggest that he was willing to depart from the old traditional values because he was the first PM locally educated, not a royalty or a member of an aristocrat family. Though this may be true to some extent, in reality he was quite a sticker to traditions and did not break the norm and accepted protocols. His move was popular in the domestic sphere and gained international acceptance amongst developing nations.

It could be contended that the region became a great beneficiary to the FP initiatives of Malaysia as the western countries began to acknowledge the significant role of the region. Benefits could also be seen in the enhanced economic relationship at the individual and collective levels with western countries and regional organizations.

The economic growth since 1980’s was on the average at the rate of 8% until the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997/98 and its negative impacts that disrupted the decade long economic growth. Although the economy recovered quickly in 1999, there were numerous external and internal challenges that had confronted it since then. Externally, the tragedy of September 11 and global downturn in 2001/02 as well as the emergence of health risk associated with the Sudden and Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and avian flu in 2003, the tsunami in 2004, and escalating oil price in 2005/06 all posed different challenges to Malaysia’ s open economy. Internally, steering the country to the next stage of development require continues search for a balance between further liberalization and the development needs of the country.

Mahathir introduced the “prosper thy neighbor” rather than “beggar thy neighbor” which were grounded on the benefits not only to the neighbor’s concerned but what it would also bring to Malaysia. This would also overcome any possible problems which may overflow to Malaysia as a result of any social strife and political instability that can affect its security interest and economic development. The policy assists neighboring countries through cooperation and sharing of development strategies based on the experience of Malaysia. Malaysia initiated the ASEAN vision based on its own vision 2020 and ASEAN adopted it as ASEAN Vision 2020. It envisaged ASEAN as a community of caring societies where there would be “equitable access to opportunities for total human development” and in which the development gap among member economies would be reduced through forged closer economic integration (UNDP Report, 2004, Pg 124).

In this regard, Mahathir had indicated his aim for Malaysia to be more active in the international arena and broaden its networking to countries in Africa and Latin America. Driven by this objective, Malaysia established more embassies on this continent in light of the country’s interest to export its manufactured products and services beyond its traditional markets as well as encouraging FDI. Mahathir was determined to make Malaysia an NIC and a developed nation. At the same time to prove that a developing nation can be a successful country with sound economic policies and socio - political stability as well as placed her on the map of the world. Malaysia thus ascended as the representative to champion the rights, interest and aspiration of South countries and Islamic Ummah. It was therefore active in NAM, G77, G15, the South Commission, OIC, D8, ASEAN and EAEG/EAEC, CHOGM, Melbourne 1981, APEC meetings, opting out of the Seattle APEC meeting, Commonwealth and the Buy British Last Policy. Due to this FP posturing, Mahathir was perceived as anti-British and anti-West and, this concern became more apparent since he was demonstrating the interest of the developing nations on the issue of the Antarctica,

Rajmah (2009) suggested the proximity and strong bilateral relation policy with the Arab world was based on Mahathir‘s aim to get access to the excess petro dollars. She also suggested that the proximity policy was with the intention of obtaining aid from the oil producing Arab countries. This was a mere conjecture on her part without giving any supporting evidence for her contention. This analysis seemed to be contrary to the facts which could be assumed as weak understanding of the situation in the Middle East.

On the Antarctica policy, the proposal submitted to the UN was to make him a heritage role model for mankind. Rajmah (2009) suggested that this act was intended to give Mahathir an international profile as well as to place Malaysia on the map of the world. The objective of the Antarctica initiative for Malaysia was two-fold, namely to make the governing regime more universal and her resource the heritage for mankind (Rajmah, 2009, p. 244-245). Antarctica had also given Malaysia the recognition amongst developing countries in NAM and had shown the astuteness of her diplomacy on the international stage and in the UN multilateral process. In both instances, this initiative could be inferred to be in the NI of Malaysia.

From the domestic perspective, the economic interests were reflected in the consciousness of the people’s as set goals and were further revealed in the efforts and political will towards achieving these goals. The NI of Malaysia was very much in line with her five year plan and economic policies which shaped the future of Malaysia. Mahathir‘s economic orientation was for Malaysia to achieve a sustainable economic growth and development. In some areas, economic interests were based on the economic imperatives of the nation such as; the acquisition of the Guthrie Corporation, the Buy British Last Policy, the restructuring of the financial architecture in the international system and the Look East policy.

**The Acquisition of the Guthrie Corporation and the Second Buy British Last Policy**

Sheila Nair (1997) wrote:

One example of Tun Mahathir’s challenges to western power was a short- lived ‘Buy British Last’ initiative that resulted from a hostile takeover by Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB) - an investment arm of the Malaysian state - of Guthrie Corporation, a once dominant corporate British presence in Malaysia. This exercise was a well- designed and executed exercise that bore the result beneficial to Malaysia and its public (p. 345).

The purchase of Guthrie by PNB was not a nationalisation of the British assets but an acceptable open market operation. The first Buy British Last policy lasted for eighteen months and only stopped after Tun Mahathir met Margaret Thatcher. The Buy British Last II lasted for nine months after the London Times ceased its biased reporting, and with the departure of Andrew Neil from it. Notwithstanding the improved relationship, Malaysia continued to criticise Britain on international issues of importance to the well-being of Malaysia and the global community, like the bombing and invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan.

**The Restructuring of the Financial Architecture in the International System**

Stiglitz (2003) commended Malaysia for her success, “The introduction of capital and currency controls by Malaysia as a means to overcome the crisis succeeded. At the multilateral level Malaysia demanded a restructuring of the international financial architecture, and her call was supported by other developing countries.” This was indeed in the NI of Malaysia, as it avoided a situation akin to the financial crisis in the 1990s from affecting the economy of Malaysia.

**The Look East policy**

As for the Look East Policy, Gomez (2009) indicated, “Tun Mahathir moved to change the nature the interventionist policy of Malaysia, reshaping her as a developmental state based on the Japanese experience, encapsulated in his ‘Look East’ policy”. Although his Look East Policy seemed to indicate his dislike towards the British and the West, he was not being anti-British or anti-West as it was propagated for Malaysia to emulate the success of the Japanese and Korean economic models and work ethics. In terms of economic development and growth, Malaysia benefited from this policy by giving her entrepreneurs exposure to Japanese Management skills and practices, first hand.

Malaysia pursued economic orientation driven by her ambition to be an example of a successful multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country economically and politically, and to be an NIC initially and under Vision 2020, a developed country. The priorities of the policy were ASEAN, small and developing countries (South-South), Islamic *Ummah* and East Asia (including ASEAN). He promoted EAEG initially and changed it to EAEC with the objective of economic cooperation amongst ASEAN and North East Asian countries. Due to the size and sheer economic potentials of these East Asian countries, just as North American countries and Europe had institutionalised economic cooperation under NAFTA and EU respectively.

However, this was rejected particularly by the US, Australia, New Zealand, and closer to the region, Indonesia and Singapore**.** Despite that, Mahathir succeeded indirectly when ASEAN+3 mechanisms were established in 1997 in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. He was acclaimed as the leader of the South who spoke bluntly and openly on the injustices of the international system in multifaceted area of economic, political, security, and societal interests and imperatives.

**Security Interest**

The security interest of Malaysia is hypothecated into 5 sub interest securing the political, economic and societal interest.

* 1. **First security interest** – Neutralising Existential Threats – these were threats which threaten the very existence of Malaysia. A classic example was the Confrontation; when Indonesia threatened to crush Malaysia as it was construed by Sukarno as a western ploy to create hegemony and a neo-colonist agenda. In order to neutralise such threats in the future, based on NI, the FP maintained the Five-Power Defence Arrangement even during the rocky times in the bilateral relationship of Malaysia with UK and Australia.
  2. **Second security interest** – Neutralising Potential Sources of Armed Conflict with Other States – these were threats which may lead to armed conflict although they did not threaten the existence of Malaysia. Some examples were overlapping claims on the China Sea and Spratlys. The FP of Malaysia emphasizes: (i) the respect for the rule of international law in resolving such claims, for instance Sipadan and Litigan with Indonesia, BatuPuteh with Singapore where both countries agreed to refer the disputes to ICJ and presently has been resolved. (ii) using mutual economic benefit; for instance, JDA with Thailand. One was decided in favour of Malaysia (Litigan and Sipadan) and the other against Malaysia (BatuPuteh).
  3. **Third security interest** - Neutralising Threats to the Existing Socio-Political Order in Malaysia - one classic case of this was the Communist Insurgency or the current threats from international terrorism. This did not threaten the sovereignty of Malaysia but it threatened the Constitutional system. The FP posture in this respect was to pro-actively stop potential sources of support for such threat. For example, the use of diplomatic relations to stop not just the aid from China to CPM but also to stop party ties between CCP and CPM. Even during the low points of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Singapore, it did not affect the security cooperation with Singapore at the bilateral level and the arrangement under the FPDA.
  4. **Fourth security interest** - Neutralising Constraints on Malaysia freedom of action - Malaysia wanted to prevent domination of the region by any one big power as this would constrain our own freedom of action - “This interdependence must be viewed as an asset for the good and prosperity of all, not an opportunity and framework for manipulation and oppression by the stronger nations” (Alagasari, 1994, p. 22). Tun Mahathir was vocal on the western domination and hegemony. In this regard, the FP promoted a diversity of ties. Whilst Malaysia has strained political relations with the US, she allowed the visits by the US Navy ships even though it could be stridently against many aspects of the US policies. Malaysia did not join other Asian countries in demanding repeated apologies from Japan, as Malaysia wanted Japan to play an active role in Malaysia. Malaysia diversified her sources of defence procurements such as buying military assets from the UK, US, France and Russia.
  5. **Fifth security interest** – Neutralising Threats by Non-state Actors – including the Jemaah Islamiah. Premised on the NI, the FP emphasized cooperation with; Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines to neutralise such threats.

**Societal Interest**

It was in the social interest of Malaysia to undertake policies for the common good of society as a whole. Alder (2008) defined social interest as an attitude or outlook towards furthering the welfare of others. It comprised a set of beliefs about the relationship between actions and outcomes. Actions evidencing societal interest caused a certain set of outcomes to occur, which were welfare-enhancing; those that do not are welfare-reducing. Any policy creates winners and losers. The key to evaluate is whether on balance, the policy is welfare-enhancing. In a democratic society, there are many interpretations on what might be welfare-enhancing. The policy undertook by Malaysia in terms of re-distribution in the context of economic growth, welfare assistance and eradication of poverty policies were in the NI and influenced the FP of Malaysia.

Under Vision 2020, the intention of creating ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ or a ‘Malaysian Nation’ out of her diversity was to attain unity and harmony of her diverse communities. Even the NEP with its two prongs objectives of eradicating poverty irrespective of race and pursuing economic growth with equity, was ended to sustain internal security and political stability. This would serve the economic, political and societal needs of the country.

Mahathir stated, “Under the NEP, all races have a stake in the economic growth and development of the country. I took policy action that was appropriate and we did not suffer the same fate as Indonesia” (Mahathir Mohamad, personal communication, June 13, 2013).

Cooperation and championing the cause of developing countries on major international issues like environment, human rights and democracy (this was implemented to align the policy of Malaysia to developing and non-alignment countries). This issues were important for the internal political and social stability of Malaysia and hence for her societal interests.

**3.0 SUMMARY**

These discourses had proven that various FP postures, initiatives and outcomes in Mahathir’s era were shaped and influenced by the NI with change and continuity. Idiosyncrasy or iconoclasm was not a significant factor but the domestic and international environments were. Overall, this paper stressed that the important imperatives of NI, and that having flexible FP eased the way for Malaysia to become one of the world’s top trading nations, thus maintaining its security, political and domestic peace and stability. These were consistent with the nation’s NI. In this regard, Malaysia showed in her FP that she was guided by the NI as clearly defined earlier. The key findings also signify that the FP of Malaysia is not ideologically based and is always principled, consistent and pragmatic in line with the nations NI. This paper ultimately proves that the NI and the FP were in fact, interlinked to protect the security, independence and the economic well-being of Malaysia and its citizens.

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