



A PRINCIPLED MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY APPROACH FOR SOUTH KOREA TO NAVIGATE THE U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY

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ABSTRACT

In the context of growing US-China tensions, South Korean administrations have opted for degrees of strategic ambiguity, refraining from overt actions that suggest South Korea is taking sides. While strategic ambiguity has been moderately successful, there are limits to this approach which make it unsustainable. This paper will argue that rather, South Korea needs to apply a principled middle power diplomacy, which refers to a middle power carrying out roles expected of it in accordance with a set of rules or values that uphold the liberal international order. The goal of principled middle power diplomacy would be to shape the environment in which the current great power rivalry is unfolding, in order to moderate the fallout of great power competition. After an analysis of South Korea's middle power diplomacy, this paper will recommend that South Korea double down on its commitment to multilateralism so that it can augment its roles as a facilitator and agenda-setter on the international stage.

INTRODUCTION

According to a 2020 poll by the East Asia Institute (EAI), to the question of what are the “Threats to South Korea’s national interest in the coming decade,” 34.9 percent answered that United States (U.S.)-China hegemonic competition posed a “significant threat,” compared to the 24.4 percent that answered the same in 2015.¹ The increase in threat perception reflects the growing frequency of clashes between the U.S. and China, particularly during the Donald Trump administration.

While U.S. President Joe Biden has stated that his administration seeks to cooperate with China where they can, the first few months of the Biden administration have shown that he will maintain his predecessor’s firm stance on China. Indeed, it is becoming clear that U.S.-China tensions were not a signature of the Trump administration but rather an embedded feature of the shifting regional order. As such, countries in the Indo-Pacific region must take a long-term perspective in formulating strategies to brace for future uncertainties.

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For South Korea, many administrations have opted for degrees of strategic ambiguity, refraining from overt actions that suggest South Korea is taking sides.² This strategy stems from the importance South Korea places in its respective relations with the U.S. and China. The joint statement from the first summit between Biden and South Korean President Moon Jae-in reiterated that the alliance is the “linchpin for stability and prosperity” of the region, and that the two have recommitted to an “ironclad alliance.”³ Meanwhile, South Korea and China have enjoyed a “strategic cooperative partnership” since 2008, an upgrade made during the Lee Myung-bak administration from the previous “comprehensive and cooperative partnership.”⁴

While strategic ambiguity has been moderately successful, this paper will argue that it is an unsustainable strategy. Rather, South Korea needs to apply a principled middle power diplomacy centered on promoting greater multilateralism. A middle power role has been relatively under-utilized by the current Moon administration. Despite Moon’s numerous references to South Korea’s middle power status in his speeches, concrete behavior as a middle power has been lacking, with the exception of meetings under the MIKTA framework, an informal grouping among Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia.

This paper will first examine the limits of strategic ambiguity. Then, it will explain the concept of a principled middle power diplomacy, shedding light on how middle powers can acquire strategic space to practice middle power diplomacy even in times of great power instability. This paper will then assess South Korea’s middle power diplomacy to date and make the argument that going forward, South Korea should double down on multilateralism to augment its roles as a facilitator and agenda-setter on the international stage. It will argue that a principled middle power diplomatic approach can help South Korea navigate aspects of the U.S.-China rivalry.

LIMITS OF STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

The rationale behind strategic ambiguity is that the U.S. is South Korea’s most important ally, and that trade relations with China are just too big to risk offending Beijing. Indeed, South Korea’s trade volume with China in 2020 was larger than the sum of South Korea’s trade with the U.S. and Japan—its second and third largest trading partners, respectively—combined. As such, South Korea cannot risk alienating either the U.S. or China.

However, this bifurcated view of the U.S. in terms of security, and China in terms of trade, misses the realities of the present situation. It glosses over China’s increasingly aggressive military footprint in the region and China’s practice of securitization of various issues, as well as actions taken by the U.S. during the Trump administration that have undermined the liberal international order. Adding to this is that both economic and security aspects of U.S.-China relations are also becoming more intertwined, competitive, and confrontational. These changes require a recalibration of South Korea’s reasoning behind strategic ambiguity.

Furthermore, a crucial drawback is that there is no guaranteed return on adopting strategic ambiguity. For example, the joint statement after the Moon-Biden Summit in May 2021 contained no wording on human rights abuses in China. This omission was notable compared to the joint statement following Biden’s summit with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in April 2021 which expressed concern about the human rights situation in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang region.⁵

While the omission reflected Seoul’s consideration of Beijing’s stance on this issue, China was still peeved with the inclusion of the Taiwan Strait in the Moon-Biden joint statement. The Chinese Ambassador to South Korea stated that the statement was “discouraging”⁶ and the Chinese foreign ministry warned the U.S. and South Korea against “playing with fire.”⁷ This is not to say that the Moon-Biden Summit should have contained strong language against Beijing. It merely indicates that as U.S.-China rivalry intensifies, it will become increasingly difficult for Seoul to assume an ambiguous position that satisfies both Washington and Beijing.

There are numerous examples of other countries in a position similar to South Korea’s which show that it is indeed possible to articulate a position on a contentious issue. While not necessarily taking sides, these countries have clearly expressed opposition to behavior that is at odds with the liberal international order.

For example, Australia has been one of the more vocal middle powers in taking a firm stance on China. In 2018, Australia banned Huawei from its 5G network due to security concerns⁸ and in April 2020, Australia called for an independent investigation on the outbreak of COVID19 in China.⁹ In response, China announced a series of bans or tariffs on certain Australian goods citing anti-dumping measures.¹⁰ In December 2020, Australia requested the World Trade Organisation (WTO) act as an adjudicator to resolve the trade dispute.¹¹

Another example is how the Philippines brought a case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration against China on matters concerning the South China Seas in 2013.¹² Although China did not participate in the arbitration and rejected the ruling that it did not have claims over the specific maritime area, it serves as an example of using international law and setting a precedent of protesting against unlawful behavior in the region.

It must be mentioned that behavior that is at odds with the liberal international order has not only been carried out by China but also the U.S. when it withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). In the aftermath, Japan’s role in building the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is an example of Japan’s principled middle power leadership.

Strategic ambiguity has been moderately successful because neither the U.S. nor China has explicitly asked South Korea to choose sides. However, as the U.S.-China rivalry intensifies,

there may come a point where there is clear expectation for South Korea to state where it stands. Repeatedly adopting an ambiguous stance on a given issue will not only make South Korea's position vulnerable to future points of contention between the U.S. and China but could also potentially make South Korea appear as the weak link in the network of U.S. alliances. Given that there is no foreseeable end to the U.S.-China rivalry, a more sustainable path for South Korea is to adopt what this paper refers to as principled middle power diplomacy.

CONCEPTUALIZING PRINCIPLED MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

Principled middle power diplomacy refers to a middle power carrying out roles expected of it in accordance with a set of rules or values that uphold the liberal international order. This conceptualization can be unpacked in two ways. The first is to define what it means to be a middle power. The second is to identify what makes middle power diplomacy principled.

Understanding middle powers as an analytical tool is a challenging task owing to a lack of clarity in its definition.¹³ Studies on middle powers have dealt with questions such as what a middle power looks like—either in quantifiable or behavioral terms—or have focused on specific case studies of states carrying out middle power activities on the regional or global stage, and yet, there is no overarching definition of what a middle power is.

A systematic study of middle powers was carried out by Carsten Holbraad, who traced the history of the middle power idea and noted that initial reference to middle power described a group of states that were neither large nor small. Holbraad concluded that because of this position in the international system, middle powers face challenges of gaining recognition and status.¹⁴

In contrast, other scholars have described middle powers with reference to both material and non-material attributes. For example, the seminal work by Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal utilizes four categories, consisting of geographic, normative, positional, and behavioral traits,¹⁵ while Chapnick discusses middle powers in terms of their functional, behavioral, and hierarchical features.¹⁶ For Jordaan, middle powers are also categorized by their traditional or emerging status, where the former are often stable, affluent countries while the latter are semi-peripheral, materially inequalitarian, and have recently democratized.¹⁷

The behavioral aspect of middle powers has led to extensive work on how middle powers are expected to behave. These traits include their preference for multilateralism, as well as to embrace compromise in disputes, and adopt “good international citizenship”¹⁸ in states’ foreign policy. Middle powers are adept at niche diplomacy,¹⁹ and act as catalysts or entrepreneurs, providing “intellectual and political energy”

to promote a diplomatic effort or act as facilitator, hosting meetings on a regional or global scale.²⁰ Chapnick notes the behavior of middle powers are linked to their “desire for greater international status,”²¹ for example, acting as regional leaders or conflict managers.

From a theoretical perspective, Patience notes that middle powers can be viewed through the lens of realism, where middle powers are status quo powers that support great powers in the international system, as well as in liberal institutionalism, where middle powers engage in institution building behavior to respond to regional concerns, and in constructivism, where middle powers project soft power influence over other states.²² Neack also supports a constructivist approach to middle powers, based on the argument that a state’s middlepowermanship is formulated through social processes among state leaders and academics.²³

Empirically, Cooper and Dal observe that there have been three distinct “waves” of middle power diplomacy. The first wave occurred after World War II and saw the growth of diplomacy focus on multilateralism with the establishment of the United Nations. The second wave is represented by the ad hoc growth of middle powers that espoused specific niche diplomacy, that on the whole, attempted to “stretch and redefine” the global order and their relations with the U.S.²⁴ One example is the formation of BRICS (made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which pushed the western-dominated international institutions to a more inclusive structure.²⁵ Finally, the third wave of middle powers refers to those that are embedded in the G20 framework, but particularly those included neither in the G7 nor in the BRICS, which leaves behind the so-called MIKTA group of Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea, and Australia.

An important question here is, to what extent can middle powers actually carry out middle power roles during periods of great power tension?²⁶ As mentioned above, Patience notes that from a realist perspective, middle powers are status quo powers that support great powers in the international system, “seeking to take advantage of the security and associated advantages that their partnering offers.”²⁷ In periods of great power stability, middle powers can also choose to constrain major powers’ actions.²⁸ In doing so, middle powers are able to maintain their position in the international hierarchy.

However, in situations of great power conflict, it is unclear what room there is for middle powers to maneuver. In times of great power conflict, a middle power has the option to unequivocally side with their great power sponsor on the one hand, or to commit to a position of nonalignment on the other. The former reflects episodes of Australia’s recent middle power behavior while the latter reflects middle power behavior of Malaysia. South Korea’s case of strategic ambiguity would be a case of purposefully obscuring where it stands on this spectrum. In both extremes, room for middle power maneuverability is indeed limited.

A third way would be to commit to a set of norms which are commensurate with the state's aspirations for international recognition or status, examples of which can be seen in the behaviors of Japan and ASEAN. Middle powers can achieve this by promoting multilateralism and utilizing various networks created in the process. Borrowing insight from network theorists, a state's position in a network is what enables the middle power's agency²⁹ and facilitates actors' "ability to act as entrepreneurs."³⁰ In this sense, during periods of great power tension, middle powers can acquire room to maneuver by creating and making use of various networks.

This third way depicts a principled middle power diplomacy. In other words, principled middle power diplomacy refers to middle powers behavior that supports the rules and values which uphold the liberal international order, such as norms of a liberal democratic state and support for free trade, rule of law, human rights, and multilateralism. This is principled in the sense that it goes back to the classical notion of middle powers and their practice of coalition-building and supporting multilateralism, but it is also principled in the sense that there is a normative foundation for middle powers' diplomacy.

In the context of U.S.-China tensions, the goal of principled middle power diplomacy should be directed at shaping the environment in which the current great power rivalry is unfolding through creation of networks. Through principled middle power diplomacy, middle powers should aim to moderate the extremities and fall out of great power competition.

ASSESSMENT OF SOUTH KOREA'S MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

In expressions used by South Korean presidents in describing South Korea as a middle power, there are frequent references to geographic traits (located in the "middle" of two areas) and a bridging role due to its developmental experience (a "bridge" between developing and developed countries) particularly in international organizations. There were also references to South Korea's role in international organizations, and to specific norms.

For example, in a 1994 speech for business leaders, President Kim Young-sam stated, "for the development of the APEC, we need to strengthen our roles and responsibilities as a middle power."³¹ This idea of a bridging role carried over to later conservative governments. The Lee Myung-bak administration's Statecraft White Paper published after the end of his term stated that, "the Lee Myung-bak administration contributed to the future direction of APEC by actively utilizing its middle power position which can act as a bridge between the developed and developing countries, between East Asia and the Americas, and between APEC and G20."³² Expressions from progressive President Moon Jae-in,

such as the "Republic of Korea grew to a middle power from a developing country,"³³ indicate that South Korea's image as a middle power is linked to material traits (geographic and economic) more so than non-material traits (behavioral). The role of middle powers in promoting specific norms was mentioned by President Kim Dae-jung in a meeting with the premier of New South Wales of Australia: "Cooperation between South Korea and Australia is necessary to establish global economic norms. These norms which should not be simply led by the developed countries but also reflect the positions of the developing countries and middle powers."³⁴

In terms of actual middle power behavior, there is a distinction between activities explicitly framed as a middle power effort and policies that include middle power roles, despite not being presented as examples of middle power diplomacy.

Examples of the former include affirming bilateral ties with other middle powers, such as Australia, Canada, Singapore, and Indonesia; participating in international institutions, such as the UN, APEC, G20 and MIKTA; and engaging in official development assistance (ODA) and peacekeeping operations (PKO). Across all administrations since President Kim Young-sam's term starting in 1993, these activities have been consistently carried out and referenced in presidential speeches and diplomatic white papers published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Then, there are policies that include middle power roles, despite not being framed as middle power diplomacy. These include each administrations' key policies, specifically, Kim Dae-jung's proactive engagement policy towards North Korea,³⁵ referred to as the Sunshine Policy; Roh Moo-hyun's Peace and Prosperity in Northeast Asia Policy,³⁶ Lee Myung-bak's New Asia Initiative,³⁷ Park Geun-hye's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI),³⁸ and Moon Jae-in's Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility (NAPCOR).³⁹

These key policies have had clear implications for how to deal with the issue of North Korea. Liberals who tend to favor engagement prioritize improving inter-Korean relations and are at odds with conservatives who take on a more hardline attitude towards North Korea and favor stronger relations with the U.S. Table 1 shows South Korea's middle power diplomacy from 1993 to date.

There have been clear differences in the focus of middle power diplomacy split along ideological lines. Liberals, such as Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, pursued key policies centered around the region, and generally sought the role of a mediator, often involving the North Korea problem. This is represented in Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy and Roh Moo-hyun's Peace and Prosperity in Northeast Asia policy.

Table 1. South Korea's middle power diplomacy from 1993 to present

President	Middle Power Focus	Examples of Middle Power Diplomacy
Kim Young-sam (1993-1998)	• Unclear	• UN Peacekeeping
Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003)	• Regional	• Sunshine Policy • UN Peacekeeping
Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008)	• Regional	• Peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia • Dispatch of troops to Iraq
Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013)	• International • Issue-specific	• Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), Official Development Assistance (ODA), UN Peacekeeping • Green growth Initiative • Nuclear security
Park Geun-hye (2013-2017)	• International • Issue-specific	• MIKTA • ODA • The Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI)
Moon Jae-in (2017-present)	• Regional • International • Issue-specific	• Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility (NAPCOR) • Participation in 'minilaterals' and high-level summits • Green New Deal

Meanwhile, conservatives such as Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye pursued key policies that saw South Korea's role unfolding on the global stage, and not necessarily tied to the region. One example is the Global Korea Policy under President Lee Myung-bak. Although there was a regional pillar termed the New Asia Initiative, the Lee administration's representative middle power activities had a clear issue-specific focus, such as green growth or hosting the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012.

These ideological differences have manifested in key policies that, by design, include middle power behavior that cannot be wholly accepted by the opposition party, which could explain the challenges of continuity across administrations. The Moon administration may be an exception in that Moon has pursued policies with a holistic focus inclusive of regional, international, and issue-specific areas as well as the administration's re-focus on green growth, which was borne during the Lee Myung-bak administration and neglected during the Park Geun-hye administration.

Given the variance in middle power objectives, focus, partners, and achievements, one view could be that South Korea has promoted active middle power diplomacy in a broad range of fields. A more critical view would be that Korean governments have lacked a clear blueprint behind their middle power diplomacy, and that the phrase "middle power" has been generally used as a modifier or accessory attached to a wide range of Korea's diplomatic activities.

This inconsistency reflects the evolving concept of middle power within South Korea's policy circles. This is evident in the example of South Korea's chosen middle power partners. During the debate on UN reforms, Roh Moo-hyun emphasized the need to expand the non-permanent members of the United National Security Council (UNSC)

and promoted an informal group of middle power countries under the name of the "coffee club" to further discuss this stance. Interestingly, the group of countries included Italy, Pakistan, Spain, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Malta, while the more traditionally accepted group of middle powers, such as India and Brazil held the position that the UNSC should increase its permanent members.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the group of middle power partners in the MIKTA framework formed under President Park Geun-hye were composed of Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea, and Australia.

Inconsistency among middle powers is also discussed in the theoretical debates on middle powers. For example, in order to understand why a country exhibits certain middle power behavior, the context, content, and choice faced by the middle power must be considered.⁴¹ This can explain why no two middle powers are alike and why middle power behavior changes across administrations in a single country. Applied to the South Korean case, consideration of context, content, and choice can explain why there has been such variation in middle power behavior over the years.

Likewise, an argument can be made that during periods of great-power tension (context), middle powers can choose to exhibit principled middle power behavior in order to acquire greater degrees of agency (choice). The specific content of middle power behavior depends on the country in question with due consideration to material and non-material attributes.

MULTILATERALISM KEY TO SOUTH KOREA'S PRINCIPLED MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

Ultimately, principled middle power diplomacy is preferable to strategic ambiguity in periods of U.S.-China tensions. Not only does it allow greater agency, but it also provides a degree

of predictability on where South Korea stands on a given issue. Principled middle power diplomacy also establishes a philosophical foundation for South Korea's middle power diplomacy, which would theoretically allow greater policy consistency across administrations. Finally, it also fits better with South Korea's aspirations on the international stage as an advanced and developed country.

South Korea can adopt principled middle power diplomacy by reinforcing its commitment to multilateralism. As mentioned above, in periods of great-power tension, middle powers risk losing diplomatic space to maneuver. In order to prevent this from happening, middle powers can utilize networks to enhance multilateral frameworks which can uphold norms such as free trade, rule of law, and human rights, and which can create new regimes, and temper the fallout of great-power tensions. Active participation in multilateralism allows South Korea to diversify and deepen relations with various countries and provides opportunities to carry out niche diplomacy.

The benefits of a network approach for South Korea's middle power diplomacy have been discussed in various literature. For example, the degree of interconnectedness among actors supports coalition building processes, and positional advantages of being connected to multiple nodes in a network can allow South Korea to increase its ability to act as a broker.⁴² South Korea can also utilize networking strategies associated with framing its position in a regional context, which bring states and non-state actors together to work towards a shared goal.⁴³

Adding to this is the fact that South Korea is well-connected. It is a party to numerous frameworks, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting, ASEAN+ frameworks, MIKTA, Visegrad Group+, ROK-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Indian Ocean Rim Association, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Korea-Pacific Island Countries Senior Officials' Meeting. South Korea's relationship with the European Union is also extensive; it is the only country to have three key agreements with the EU: a Framework Agreement, a Free Trade Agreement, and a Crisis Management Participation Agreement, all having entered into force.⁴⁴

Indeed, South Korea has had success in promoting and participating in high level multilateral frameworks. Recent examples include taking part in the G7 meeting, hosting the 2021 Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 which concluded with the Seoul Declaration, and President Moon's proposal of a Northeast Asia Cooperation for Health Security Initiative. The next step should focus on following through on the agreements reached in these various multilateral frameworks. Only through concrete follow through can South Korea's roles as facilitator and agenda setter be taken seriously.

In terms of specific policy recommendations, South Korea should revitalize MIKTA with a more concrete agenda. Although its flexibility and consultative nature is MIKTA's strength, its lack of clear actions, other than joint statements and exchange programs, makes MIKTA easy to overlook. 2023 will be the ten-year anniversary since the first meeting convened on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. Working closely with Indonesia, which will assume Chair in 2023, the South Korean government should prepare a blueprint for the next ten years of MIKTA, including specific areas of niche diplomacy, norms that MIKTA will promote, actionable plans, and partners for cooperation. Utilizing South Korea's networks, prospects for a MIKTA-Plus grouping should also be explored, which can act as a platform to engage both China and the U.S. as well as other interested parties.

In addition, efforts should be made to participate in multilateral frameworks driven by other middle powers. Examples include the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, established by the trade ministers of India, Japan, and Australia⁴⁵ and the CPTPP. The official stance of the South Korean government is that it will "actively consider" joining the CPTPP.⁴⁶ With both China and the U.S.' expressed interest in joining the framework, the CPTPP could bring the region a step closer to a free trade area with comprehensive coverage and high standards.

South Korea should also take part in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) Plus. While the Moon administration has avoided officially joining the Quad for fear of antagonizing China, it is important to recognize what the Quad has actually done or said it will do. The Quad-plus virtual talks held in 2020 by the U.S., Japan, India, Australia, and the Plus countries of South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam at the vice-ministerial level narrowed down the topics of discussion to cooperation on issues such as handling the COVID-19 pandemic and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief.⁴⁷ These activities are not aimed at countering China.

More recently, the Joint Statement published after first Quad Summit in 2021 outlined areas of cooperation, most of which focused on responding to the challenges brought on by the pandemic and made brief references to climate change, cooperation on critical technologies, maritime security, commitment to North Korea's denuclearization, and support for Myanmar.⁴⁸ These are issues that affect South Korea and areas where South Korea can make a valuable contribution. In this light, there is a need for the South Korea government to communicate that participation in Quad Plus does not constitute an anti-China turn.

CONCLUSION

In the context of growing U.S.-China tensions, South Korea should step away from its strategy of ambiguity and adopt a principled middle power diplomacy. Strategic ambiguity has served its purpose but is an unsustainable strategy. As

confrontation and competition between the U.S. and China intensifies across various issues from trade to the human rights, it will become increasingly difficult for South Korea to maintain its current position in a way that satisfies both the U.S. and China. Not only are returns likely to diminish over time, but insistence on an ambiguous stance could also give the perception that South Korea is an unreliable ally.

A preferable strategy would be to adopt a principled middle power diplomacy, in which South Korea carries out roles expected by a middle power in accordance with a set of rules

or values that uphold the liberal international order. Given the shared overlap in terms of values between South Korea and the U.S., principled middle power diplomacy will further strengthen South Korea's alliance relations with the U.S. A key to principled middle power diplomacy would be for South Korea to take advantage of its networks and double down on promoting multilateralism. The benefits of doing so include diversification of relations with other countries, opportunities to promote niche diplomacy, and preservation of greater agency in the midst of U.S.-China tensions.

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Contract Editor: Gimga Group | **Design:** Gimga Group

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