

Changing American Focus, can France turn this to its benefit?

Fanni Korpics

NOVEMBER 2021

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Abstract: *The United States has been significantly changing its foreign policy focus from the Transatlantic region and from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region as a result of its increasing competition with China. This new international scenario can offer some opportunities for European allies, especially for France, but it can also pose several challenges that will need to be met. As a response to these opportunities and challenges, France led by President Emmanuel Macron has volunteered to lead Europe, in particular the European Union in an effort to fill in the gap left by Washington. The initiatives proposed are based on the creation of a European Strategic Autonomy, establishing a foreign policy and defence strategy with a European focus. France wants Europe's defence to be built on several pillars: the EU, the NATO, and the multilateral cooperations. Despite Paris's European ambition we also have to note, that France is trying to turn the changing American focus to its own national benefit.*

Keywords: *US strategic focus, European strategic autonomy, France, foreign policy, defence policy*

Is the US withdrawing from its traditional role as global policeman? What will happen with Europe in a scenario where the rivalry with China is more important for Washington than the cooperation with Europe? There is a country, France, that is keen to lead the forming European Strategic Autonomy, however it is questionable whether Paris's European partners will accept this new role President Emmanuel Macron is trying to assume for his country. France intends to turn the absence of the US and the reluctance of Germany to its own benefit, pursuing its national interests. This article aims at describing the new defence frameworks initiated by France, and at showing in which regions can Paris consolidate its influence.

Introduction

Today, we can witness how the US's international focus is changing, which triggers a necessary change in Europe's geopolitical position as well. On a European scene, where the United Kingdom has left the integration and Germany is reluctant to assume a political weight that could correspond to its economic influence, in 2017 a young and ambitious French President was elected with a strong European focus. He however follows on the Gaullist foreign policy tradition that seeks to use the EU's credibility and room of manoeuvre for furthering the French national interests. The launch of Emmanuel Macron's agenda in 2017 aiming at a sovereign Europe exercising a greater strategic autonomy happened almost in parallel with the United States changing its geopolitical focus from the Transatlantic to the Transpacific region. The implications can and probably will affect European defence, the challenge which President Macron is more than ready to respond to.

The decline of US presence across the Atlantic started indeed in parallel with Emmanuel Macron's term, therefore we usually interpret the new direction introduced by him into French and European foreign policy as a response to the change in American strategic focus. Europe is an economic giant, but a political and military dwarf. This is what France, and its young and ambitious president have set out to remedy. In his foreign policy plan for France, President Macron aims to bring changes in the following fields: French strategy in Libya, a new policy towards Russia, confrontation with Turkey for the Eastern-Mediterranean supremacy, criticism and challenge of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), accelerating the Franco-German engine, creating a European strategic autonomy by developing existing defence and security policy frameworks and in the meantime creating new ones, and strengthening the European Union's (EU) role in general on the global scene. In the French perspective the framework of international security and defence policy has fundamentally changed, and France cannot do else, but anticipate and meet these challenges, finding a new position in this forming new world order dominated by the rivalry unfolding between the superpowers of our age: China and the United States.¹

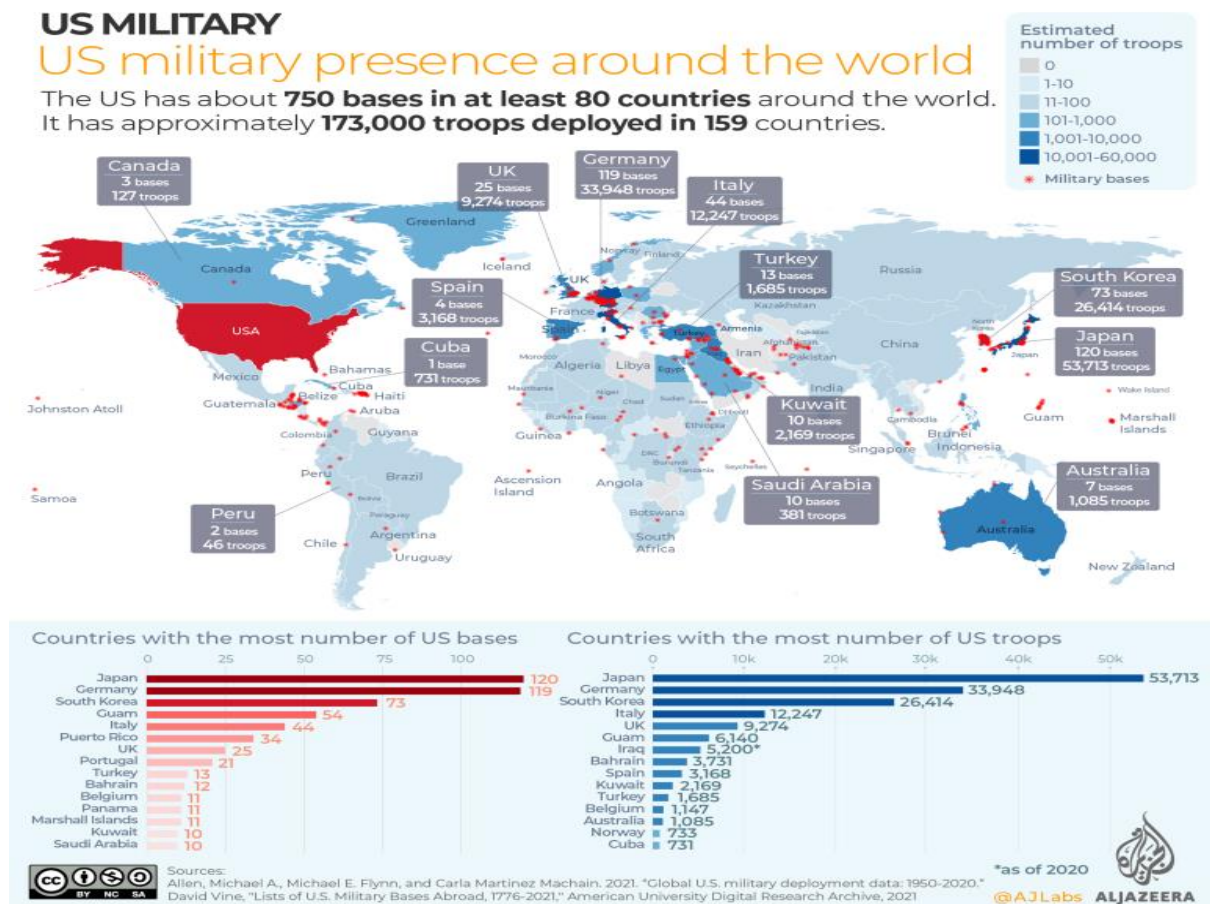
Traditional Transatlantic US presence

Historically, since the Second World War European defence has been provided by the United States. Defence cooperation within NATO became crucial for the US in the deterrence policy against the Soviet Union and for Europe to be protected by the American nuclear umbrella. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, yet, the Transatlantic alliance has not managed to establish a new framework for cooperation so far, new initiatives were merely reduced to Washington's attempt to push the partners to increase military spending to 2% of their GDP.²

It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that in the meantime, the US strategic priorities have changed. It was the Trump administration that brought the need for the United States to retreat from its traditional role as a security guarantor for the European continent into the agenda, a development proving to be worrying in some European capitals.³ This era was followed by the Biden administration, which however did not move significantly away from the new foreign policy focus introduced by its predecessor. Both administrations believe that the priority is the competition with China even at the expense of the Transatlantic alliance. This conviction of the current US government is enshrined in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance⁴ published in March 2021. The document names the most important challenges: an increasingly assertive China and a destabilising Russia, projecting a more robust presence in the Indo-Pacific, but also in Europe, and an inevitable change of attitude in the policies towards the Middle East and North Africa. A precedence of importance can also be detected in this document, as it always refers to the following areas of concern in this order: Indo-Pacific, Europe and the Western Hemisphere. This document does not even try to conceal the fact, that there is an actual big power rivalry between the US and China.⁵

After being massively present in Europe, the Trump administration decided on a pullout of its troops, which eventually was halted by the Biden administration not long after coming into power. Nevertheless, the probability of the decrease or entire elimination of US military presence in Europe might act as a wake-up call and prompt countries like Germany and France to accelerate talks and materialise actions on the subject of a European defence integration. It is not the actual US military presence that Europe expects from Washington, but rather the nuclear umbrella it extends above the

continent. Now France, the only remaining nuclear power of the European integration might volunteer to replace the American umbrella with a French one, should the need arise. Some voices on the other side of the Atlantic also say, that particularly wealthy nations such as Germany should cover their own defence expenses. For Europe, it is a signal, that perhaps in Washington not everybody is happy with the US financing the defence of their European allies.⁶



Source: Al Jazeera⁷

After that the US left Afghanistan this August, there remains the significant question: what role does the Biden administration want to have in the Middle East. There is of course a simple answer to this question: it wants to spend less money and it wants to avoid the appearance of any more failed states in the region. But this is only a part of the whole picture, at least from Europe's perspective. What they want to know is whether Washington is prepared to participate in diplomatic efforts for the revival of the Iran nuclear deal, the settlement of Arab-Israeli or the Syrian issue, just to mention some examples. In the question of Africa insecurity over US commitment still remains, be it regarding the humanitarian or security issues there. Today, Washington is no

longer willing or able to play the role of global policeman, especially in the Middle East and Africa, as a result the United States wants to afflict the burden and the costs of crisis management and counterterrorism on the regional and European allies. The US is gradually cutting the number of troops stationed on the African continent, most importantly at the Sahel. This is the room for manoeuvre where France can push into, dragging the whole of the EU behind it. This would be a favourable scenario for the Americans as they already rely on a significant French Presence in Africa.⁸

In order for the European strategic autonomy to materialise, a transatlantic agreement would be necessary, so that the notion could be embedded into NATO's new strategic concept. Until now, on the other hand, the concept has been rejected by the US, out of the fear that it might challenge NATO, make it redundant on the long run. Nevertheless, Washington might need a stronger Europe, if it means to deter China's growing military presence in Asia.⁹

French initiative for European strategic autonomy

Basically, France has been a declining power, at least in terms of foreign policy impact and global presence. President Macron, when entering into office expressed his determination to change this downward course and reinstate France as a truly globally present power. What is more, his ambitions were met with a highly favourable international scene, where Washington under the Trump administration was withdrawing from the European and African regions, and Berlin did not show initiation in diplomatic matters. Emmanuel Macron in his rhetoric presents himself as a true and unbiased believer of multinationalism, nevertheless, we should be careful in assessing his foreign policy, as in the end of the day these policies tend to serve first and for most the French national interest. Therefore, as French national interest dictates that France should not sink into irrelevance on the world stage, he advocates, as did most French presidents before him, for a strong Europe that is not crushed between the current superpowers.¹⁰ Subsequently, when the French national interest differs from that of the whole of the European Union the Macron government does not hesitate to act on its own. As a result, there is a general distrust towards French foreign and security

policy initiatives among European partners. Yet, French public opinion attributes a great role to the EU in furthering French geopolitical interests, a bigger role than to the economic advantages the single market and the eurozone have brought.¹¹

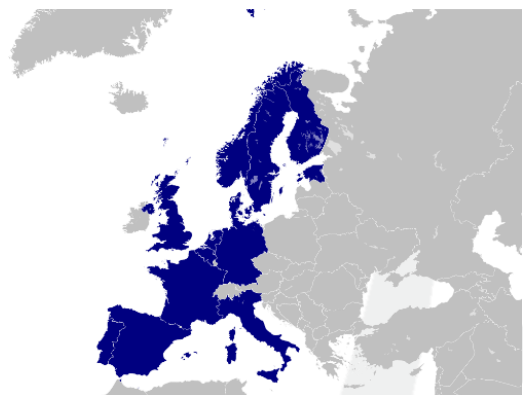
In France's perspective the European Union is a very important, even though not the sole channel through which the country can conduct its foreign policy and act upon its economic and defence strategy. Current French President Emmanuel Macron has a rather Gaullist vision of Europe, meaning the whole of the continent, which encompasses occasional cooperation with Russia even.¹² After Brexit and with the change in American strategic focus, France seems to be the best suited candidate for being the core of European defence, as a consequence of its nuclear power and seat in the United Nation's Security Council (UNSC). As it was stated in the 2017 Strategic Review of Defence and National Security France *"must offer ambitious defence partnerships to its partners based on a differentiated approach, with the highest priority being given to the more willing and able European nations."* They mean to realise this by *"providing support, both within and outside the EU and NATO frameworks, for the various promising initiatives that strengthen strategic convergence among European nations regarding their shared security."*¹³ Right after entering into power the French president outlined a plan for a sovereign, united and democratic Europe, dubbed the Initiative for Europe. In this speech delivered at the Sorbonne University in Paris, President Macron advocated for a European strategic autonomy needed for Europe not to lose its relevance in current international power relations, defined mainly by the rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

The main framework for the EU security strategy is still the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), where a Paris-Berlin axis is apparent. This cooperation is fuelled mainly by the insecurity of the transatlantic partnership, although it suffers from several constraints deriving from the long-standing differences of respective political cultures and public opinions in France and in Germany. Nevertheless, in order for a European strategic autonomy to be successively formed the revival and consolidation of the Franco-German tandem is essential. Also, it would be important to convince eastern EU members to join the plan, despite the fact that they have, and wish to maintain close ties with Washington. A reform of the EU decision-making process is also necessary in order to be able to make quick decisions, crucial in security policy issues.¹⁴ European strategic autonomy for France, however, means more than just the

defence autonomy. It also involves autonomy in foreign policy and economy, which can be problematic in the eyes of eastern EU partners, that fear that the initiative for strengthening the cooperation within the CSDP is to create a new edge for the French and German industries, while cutting them off of other non-EU partners.¹⁵

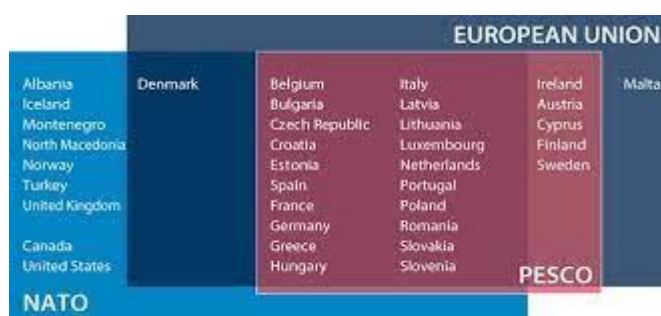
Firstly, in order to have a common defence, the establishment of a common defence budget is preponderant. Realising this, a European Defence Fund was created where member states invested €1.5 billion both in 2019 and 2020, and decided to invest a further sum of €13 billion between the period of 2021-2027. This money is spent on financing research projects and the industrial development of defence technologies.

Moreover, based on French ambition the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) was also launched with the participation of nine countries, including the United Kingdom as well, since Paris and London pledged to continue security cooperation even after Brexit was completed. The main objective of the Initiative is to boost common strategic culture among the member states.¹⁶



Source: Wikipedia

On the other hand, there is a defence initiative, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) realised completely within the EU framework, which carries the traits of a multispeed Europe, as only those member states should join, that are able and willing to participate. These countries after joining will be able to cooperate on military



investments, capability and equipment development, to coordinate their respective defence apparatus, hence ensuring interoperability, flexibility and deployability. Those EU members

European defence structure¹⁷

that decide to join have to adhere to several requirements, most importantly to spending at least 2% of their GDP on defence, and 20% on defence investment and engaging in at least one PESCO project.¹⁸

President Emmanuel Macron is completely aware that now there is a historic chance for France for taking the lead in shaping European foreign and security policy, at a time, when five factors act in its favour. The UK left the EU, the US is turning its attention towards the Pacific region and towards its rivalry with China, France has a permanent seat in the UNSC, France is the only nuclear power in the EU, and Angela Merkel is stepping down from the position of German Chancellor and Germany will have to focus mainly on crucial domestic issues, namely the creation of a new government. With Brexit, France and Germany are yet again in the centre of the European integration process, which might prove challenging, as Germany is a lot more cautious in the question of defence, advocating for a stronger cooperation between EU and NATO, while France prefers purely European defence strategy, though not exclusively including EU member states. To add another layer of complexity, this time the Franco-German tandem will not go unchallenged by their EU partners.¹⁹

French foreign policy opportunities with the US's new focus

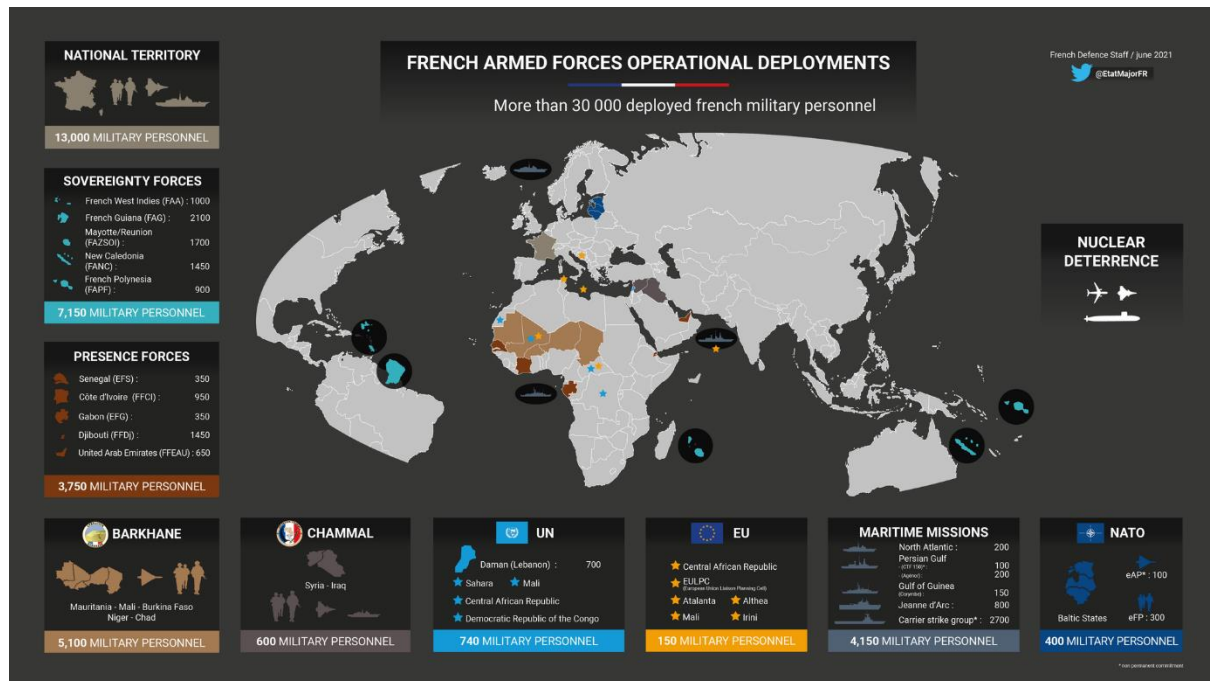
There are several territories and regions of Europe, Africa and the Middle East where France can benefit from its new-found leverage, thanks to the withdrawal of the US military from these areas, and to the fact, that Washington's attention is turning ever more significantly towards the Pacific. One of the most obvious fields for a growing French influence is the Mediterranean Sea, traditionally enjoying US defence since the start of the Cold War, but in particular, the Eastern Mediterranean region. French foreign policy towards the region is defined by national interests and realpolitik.²⁰ The most important objective for France to achieve in the region, is stability, which could hardly be realised without partners. But now, when the US turns towards East-Asia and the UK follows suit, it is only the European partners that the French can call upon.

Although there is no French territory in this subregion, Paris intends to emerge as a regional hegemon, which might turn it against NATO allies, in particular Turkey. The importance of this area has grown in recent years, as the US is seemingly less and less interested in issues of the Middle East, to which the Eastern Mediterranean basin

is the gate, and given the fact that new natural gas fields were discovered in a rather disputed maritime area. It is important to mention though, that France has always considered the Middle East to be in its zone of influence, even if this influence is shared with the UK and US. Upon the growing tensions between Greece, Cyprus and Turkey we could witness the manifestation of how France uses a scenario where Washington is absent and Berlin is indifferent in an escalation of conflict between Paris and Ankara over the maritime dispute. To complicate the situation in parallel to the US retreating from the Eastern Mediterranean two new actors, Russia and Turkey emerged challenging France's prospects.²¹ However ambitious France might seem on the geopolitical scene, it is questionable whether it can actually achieve much acting completely on its own. Analysts argue, that in a European context it is certainly more efficient to cooperate with other member states. Since President Macron took office in 2017 France has proven to be the motor for boosting foreign and security policy cooperation.

There is the question whether France can step into the American shoes and lead Europe in the Middle East. In this particular region, which has been heavily characterised by the presence of the US military in Iraq and in Afghanistan, - if we understand the Middle East in the wider sense -, France could not exacerbate the impact it might have wanted. Furthermore, we might even say, that Paris was abandoned by its European partners in this area.²² But then comes the question, who will provide security and stability in the Middle East, once the US has reduced its presence in the area, which, for now at least, seems to be an objective of the Biden administration, however most analysts warn that this would be an unfavourable scenario.²³

France is also interested in strengthening its zone of influence in Africa. Traditionally in French foreign policy the Mediterranean is mostly a gate to Africa, essential for securing routes to the Sub-Saharan regions, most of all the West-African former colonies, and the Sahel region, where France is very active in counter-terrorism even independently from NATO and the US.²⁴ On every occasion President Macron stresses the fact that the fight against terrorism should and must be France's main priority.



Source: Ministère des Armées²⁵

Stepping away from the territorial aspects of the new geopolitical reality, there are also other technological fields where France can step up as a leading military power. For example, there is the question of the EU nuclear strategy, which Paris volunteers to lead, being the only nuclear military power in the EU. President Macron ensured his partners that France sees its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against possible attacks from belligerent foes. Important to mention however, that the French military scaled down its nuclear force to under 300 nuclear weapons.²⁶ Yet, since taking office, President Macron has continuously been increasing French military spending, from 1.909% of the GDP in 2017, to 2.073% in 2020.²⁷ This ratio of military spending that amounts to \$52.7 billion positions the country to the 8th rank worldwide.²⁸ France still wishes to play a central part in nuclear deterrence in terms of European security, reserving the right to prioritise its own *force de frappe* (military strike force), but committing to the creation of a common European strategic culture. In this area President Macron fears that Europe might be dragged into an arm-race initiated by the United States and China.²⁹

Despite the growing military presence of France both on the field in Africa or in the Middle East and in the related industry, the country's reputation has been hurt by the recent developments between the US, the UK and Australia, as a result of the AUKUS deal. This is a deal Australia replaced its previous agreement with France with, buying

nuclear-propelled submarines built by the US and the UK, instead of the diesel electric-powered ones offered by France.³⁰ This further adds to the French disenchantment of the Transatlantic alliance which was so promptly articulated already some time ago by the President referring to NATO as a “*brain dead*” organisation.³¹ However, this new geopolitical situation might also help Paris in convincing European partners of further developing the strategic autonomy advocated for by France, as now both the US and UK can be framed as little responsible and inconsiderate regarding the needs of their NATO allies.

Conclusion

In reality France can count on plenty of opportunities in this new international scenario, where the United States focusses more on the Indo-Pacific region, instead of the Transatlantic region. France can seize the chance for consolidating its zones of influence in Africa and in the Middle East, in addition to herding European partners together in the creation of a European Strategic Autonomy. On the other hand, there are also several challenges, as France, - and Europe along with it -, will have to develop frameworks for their own defence, and try not to disappear in a global competition unfolding between China and the US. In President Macron’s *ars poetica*, Europe however, cannot succeed if Africa does not succeed.³² Consequently, ever since his entry into office he has been trying to turn Europe’s attention towards the continent, as he realised that the US might not be a reliable partner there anymore. It will be for the European partners, and especially the new German establishment to decide, whether they join Washington in its endeavours in the Pacific, or they accompany France in its mission to secure Europe as one of the competing superpowers in the game.

Today France, under the lead of its President Emmanuel Macron has already realised that Europe cannot overly rely on the Transatlantic alliance and the relationship with the United States, however the French are still keen to maintain mutual solidarity in this partnership. The president emphasises this by stressing on the fact that he means to maintain NATO as a pillar of European security complemented by a European defence.³³ Indeed, it is this system based on several pillars: the European cooperation, the NATO and the French multinational initiatives, that France aims to build on. The

main challenge for the country and for Europe is to find a new place in the reforming international geopolitical reality.



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