

■ “A Foreign Policy for the American People”

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Author: Antony J. Blinken

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Summary Overview

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken delivered this speech at the outset of President Biden’s administration in 2021. In it, he outlines a foreign policy for the United States focused on renewing international partnerships, combatting threats around the globe, and correcting former missteps in American diplomacy, all while keeping everyday Americans at the center of the administration’s agenda. This holistic take on international order—in which the United States interconnectedness with the world could serve Americans back home—functioned as a corrective to policies under previous administrations that focused on militaristic intervention or on domestic issues as opposed to international partnerships.

Defining Moment

President Joe Biden formally entered office in January 2021 following the first term of President Donald Trump. The former president’s administration had seen the United States renege on several international agreements organized by the United Nations, including the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Climate Agreement, both finalized during President Barack Obama’s presidency. Trump also strained relations with U.S. allies, at times threatening to pull the country out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This isolationist tendency came to a head with the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020. Due to strained international relationships, the United States was not able to coordinate with other nations effectively in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

During his 2020 presidential campaign, Biden promised to renew foreign allegiances, engage with the ongoing threat of China, and protect democracy against the rise of authoritarianism. Seeking to delineate a foreign policy wholly different from those of the past, Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s first official speech lays out several categories of policy for the new administration. Delivered in March 2021 near the beginning of Biden’s term, the speech reflects on how the State Department will protect American values at home and abroad.

Author Biography

Antony Blinken is an American government official who has served at various levels throughout his career.



Antony Blinken. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

Born in New York in 1962, Blinken earned an undergraduate degree in social studies from Harvard University before attending Columbia Law School. He entered public service as an official in the State Department in 1993 before serving in the administration of President Bill Clinton. After working as the Democratic staff director to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Blinken held several roles in the Obama

administration. During this time, he became familiar with Vice President Joe Biden, serving as his national security advisor for a period of time. Blinken's tenure under Obama culminated in his appointment as deputy secretary of state from 2015 to 2017. Blinken was confirmed as secretary of state under Joe Biden in January 2021 and served until January 20, 2025, the end of the Biden administration.



Historical Document

Antony J. Blinken— “A Foreign Policy for the American People”

Delivered 3 March 2021

Good morning.

My fellow Americans,

Five weeks ago I was sworn in as your Secretary of State. My job is to represent the United States to the world, to fight for the interests and values of the American people. When President Biden asked me to serve, he made sure that I understood that my job is to deliver for you—to make your lives more secure, create opportunity for you and your families, and tackle the global crises that are increasingly shaping your futures.

I take this responsibility very seriously. And an important part of the job is speaking to you about what we’re doing and why.

Later today, President Biden will share what’s called the “Interim [National Security] Strategic Guidance” on our national security and foreign policy. It gives initial direction to our national security agencies so that they can get to work right away while we keep developing a more in-depth national security strategy over the next several months. The interim guidance lays out the global landscape as the Biden Administration sees it, explains the priorities of our foreign policy—and specifically how we will renew America’s strength to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of our time.

So for this—my first major speech as Secretary—I’m going to walk through—walk you through how American diplomacy will carry out the President’s strategy. If we do our jobs right, you’ll be able to check our work—to see the links between what we’re doing around the world and the goals and values I’ll lay out today.

I know that foreign policy can sometimes feel disconnected from our daily lives. It’s either all about major threats—like pandemics, terrorism—or it fades from view.

That’s in part because it’s often about people and events on the other side of the world, and it’s about things you don’t see—like crises stopped before they start, or negotiations that happen out of sight.

But it's also because those of us who conduct foreign policy haven't always done a good job connecting it to the needs and aspirations of the American people. As a result, for some time now Americans have been asking tough but fair questions about what we're doing, how we're leading—indeed, whether we should be leading at all.

With this in mind, we've set the foreign policy priorities for the Biden Administration by asking a few simple questions:

- What will our foreign policy mean for American workers and their families?
- What do we need to do around the world to make us stronger here at home?
- And what do we need to do at home to make us stronger in the world?

The answers to these questions aren't the same as they were in 2017 or 2009. Yes, many of us serving in the Biden Administration also proudly served President Obama—including President Biden. And we did a great deal of good work to restore America's leadership in the world; to achieve hard-won diplomatic breakthroughs, like the deal that stopped Iran from producing a nuclear weapon; and to bring the world together to tackle climate change. Our foreign policy fit the moment, as any good strategy should.

But this is a different time, so our strategy and approach are different. We're not simply picking up where we left off, as if the past four years didn't happen. We're looking at the world with fresh eyes.

Having said that, while the times have changed, some principles are enduring.

One is that American leadership and engagement matter. We're hearing this now from our friends. They're glad we're back. Whether we like it or not, the world does not organize itself. When the U.S. pulls back, one of two things is likely to happen: Either another country tries to take our place, but not in a way that advances our interests and values; or, maybe just as bad, no one steps up, and then we get chaos and all the dangers it creates. Either way, that's not good for America.

Another enduring principle is that we need countries to cooperate, now more than ever. Not a single global challenge that affects your lives can be met by any one nation acting alone—not even one as powerful as the United States. And there is no wall high enough or strong enough to hold back the changes transforming our world.

That’s where the institution I’m privileged to lead comes in. It’s the role of the State Department—and America’s diplomats and development workers—to engage around the world and build that cooperation.

President Biden has pledged to lead with diplomacy because it’s the best way to deal with today’s challenges. At the same time, we’ll make sure that we continue to have the world’s most powerful armed forces. Our ability to be effective diplomats depends in no small measure on the strength of our military.

And in everything we do, we’ll look not only to make progress on short-term problems, but also to address their root causes and lay the groundwork for our long-term strength. As the President says, to not only build back, but “build back better.”

So here’s our plan:

First, we will stop COVID-19 and strengthen global health security.

The pandemic has defined lives—our lives—for more than a year. To beat it back, we need governments, scientists, businesses, and communities around the world working together. None of us will be fully safe until the majority of the world is immune because as long as the virus is replicating, it could mutate into new strains that find their way back to America. So we need to work closely with partners to keep the global vaccination effort moving forward.

At the same time, we need to make sure we learn the right lessons and make the right investments in global health security, including tools to predict, prevent, and stop pandemics, and a firm global commitment to share accurate and timely information so that a crisis like this never happens again.

Second, we will turn around the economic crisis and build a more stable, inclusive global economy.

The pandemic has caused unemployment to surge around the world. Nearly every country on earth is now in a recession. The pandemic also laid bare inequalities that have defined life for millions of Americans for a long time. So we’ve got a double challenge: to protect Americans from a lengthy downturn, and to make sure the global economy delivers security and opportunity for as many Americans as possible in the long term.

To do that, we need to pass the right policies at home, like the relief package the President is pushing hard for right now, while working to manage the global economy so it truly benefits the American people. And by that, I don’t just mean a bigger GDP or a rising stock market; for many American households, those measures don’t mean much. I mean good jobs, good incomes, and lower household costs for American workers and their families.

We're building on hard lessons learned. Some of us previously argued for free trade agreements because we believed Americans would broadly share in the economic gains that those—and that those deals would shape the global economy in ways that we wanted. We had good reasons to think those things. But we didn't do enough to understand who would be negatively affected and what would be needed to adequately offset their pain, or to enforce agreements that were already on the books and help more workers and small businesses fully benefit from them.

Our approach now will be different. We will fight for every American job and for the rights, protections, and interests of all American workers. We will use every tool to stop countries from stealing our intellectual property or manipulating their currencies to get an unfair advantage. We will fight corruption, which stacks the deck against us. And our trade policies will need to answer very clearly how they will grow the American middle class, create new and better jobs, and benefit all Americans, not only those for whom the economy is already working.

Third, we will renew democracy because it's under threat.

A new report from the independent watchdog group Freedom House is sobering. Authoritarianism and nationalism are on the rise around the world. Governments are becoming less transparent and have lost the trust of the people. Elections are increasingly flashpoints for violence. Corruption is growing. And the pandemic has accelerated many of these trends.

But the erosion of democracy is not only happening in other places. It's also happening here in the United States. Disinformation is rampant here. Structural racism and inequality make life worse for millions. Our elected leaders were targeted in the violent siege of the Capitol just two months ago. And more broadly, Americans are increasingly polarized—and the institutions that exist to help us manage our differences, so our democracy can continue to function, are under strain.

Shoring up our democracy is a foreign policy imperative. Otherwise, we play right into the hands of adversaries and competitors like Russia and China, who seize every opportunity to sow doubts about the strength of our democracy. We shouldn't be making their jobs easier.

I take heart from the fact that we're dealing with our struggles out in the open. And that sets us apart from many other countries. We don't ignore our failures and shortcomings or try sweep them under the rug and pretend they don't exist. We confront them for the world to see. It's painful. Sometimes it's ugly. But it's how we make progress.

Still, there's no question that our democracy is fragile. People around the world have seen that. Many recognize in our challenges the challenges that they're facing. And now they're watching us because they want to see whether our democracy is resilient, whether we can rise to the challenge here at home. That will be the foundation for our legitimacy in defending democracy around the world for years to come.

Why does that matter? Because strong democracies are more stable, more open, better partners to us, more committed to human rights, less prone to conflict, and more dependable markets for our goods and services.

When democracies are weak, governments can't deliver for their people or a country becomes so polarized that it's hard for anything to get done; they become more vulnerable to extremist movements from the inside and to interference from the outside; and they become less reliable partners for the United States. None of that is in our national interest.

The more we and other democracies can show the world that we can deliver, not only for our people but also for each other, the more we can refute the lie that authoritarian countries love to tell: that theirs is the better way to meet people's fundamental needs and hopes. It's on us to prove them wrong.

So the question isn't if we will support democracy around the world, but how.

We will use the power of our example. We will encourage others to make key reforms, overturn bad laws, fight corruption, and stop unjust practices. We will incentivize democratic behavior.

But we will not promote democracy through costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force. We've tried these tactics in the past. However well intentioned, they haven't worked. They've given democracy promotion a bad name, and they've lost the confidence of the American people. We'll do things differently.

Fourth, we will work to create a humane and effective immigration system.

Strong borders are fundamental to our national security, and laws are the bedrock of our democracy. But we also need a diplomatic, and just plain decent, solution to the fact that year after year, people from other countries risk everything to try to make it here. We need to address the root causes that drive so many people to flee their homes. And so we'll work closely with other countries, especially our neighbors in Central America, to help them deliver better physical security and economic opportunity so people don't feel like migrating is the only way out and up.

As we do this work, we will not lose sight of our core principles. Cruelty, especially to children, is unacceptable. And turning our backs on some of the most vulnerable people on earth is not who we should ever be.

One of the most important pieces of our national identity is that we are a country of immigrants. We're made stronger by the fact that hardworking people come here to go to school, start businesses, enrich our communities. We've gotten away from that part of ourselves in the past few years. We've got to get back to it.

Fifth, we will revitalize our ties with our allies and partners.

Our alliances are what the military calls "force multipliers." They're our unique asset. We get so much more done with them than we could without them. So we're making a big push right now to reconnect with our friends and allies, and to reinvent partnerships that were built years ago so they're suited to today's and tomorrow's challenges. That includes countries in Europe and Asia that have been our closest friends for decades, as well as old and new partners in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Over the decades, these commitments have created new markets for our products, new allies to deter aggression, and new partners to help meet global challenges. We had a name for it: "enlightened self-interest." We'll be clear that real partnership means carrying burdens together, everyone doing their part—not just us. And whenever we can, we will choose engagement. Wherever the rules for international security and the global economy are being written, America will be there, and the interests of the American people will be front and center.

We're always better off at the table, not outside the room. You should expect nothing less from your government.

Sixth, we will tackle the climate crisis and drive a green energy revolution.

Maybe you live in California, where wildfires get worse every year; or the Midwest, where farmland keeps flooding; or the Southeast, where communities have been destroyed by stronger and more frequent storms. The climate crisis is endangering all of us, and costing us more by the month. We can't fix it alone. The United States produces 15 percent of the world's carbon pollution. That's a lot, and we badly need to get that number down. But even if we brought it down to zero, we wouldn't solve the crisis, because the rest of the world is producing the other 85 percent.

This is the definition of a problem we need to work together, as a community of nations, to solve. And we can't settle for only doing the bare minimum. We have to challenge ourselves and each other to do more. While we do, we must

also position the United States to thrive and lead in the growing global market for renewable energy. Wind and solar are the cheapest sources of electricity generation in the world today. They're not the industries of the future anymore; the future is now. And other countries are ahead of us. We need to turn that around and create millions of good-paying jobs for Americans in renewables.

Seventh, we will secure our leadership in technology.

A global technology revolution is now underway. The world's leading powers are racing to develop and deploy new technologies, like artificial intelligence and quantum computing, that could shape everything about our lives—from where we get energy, to how we do our jobs, to how wars are fought. We want America to maintain our scientific and technological edge because it's critical to us thriving in the 21st century economy.

But we know that new technologies aren't automatically beneficial, and those who use them don't always have good intentions. We need to make sure technologies protect your privacy, make the world safer and healthier, and make democracies more resilient. That's where American diplomacy comes in. We're going to bring our friends and partners together to shape behavior around emerging technologies and establish guardrails against misuse.

At the same time, we must strengthen our tech defenses and deterrents. We need only look at SolarWinds, the major hack of U.S. Government networks last year, to see how determined our adversaries are to use technology to undermine us. Today, safeguarding our national security means investing in our technological capabilities and elevating this issue in our diplomacy and our defense. We will do both.

And eighth, we will manage the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century: our relationship with China.

Several countries present us with serious challenges, including Russia, Iran, North Korea. And there are serious crises we have to deal with, including in Yemen, Ethiopia, and Burma.

But the challenge posed by China is different. China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system—all the rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way we want it to, because it ultimately serves the interests and reflects the values of the American people.

Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.¹ The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength.

That requires working with allies and partners, not denigrating them, because our combined weight is much harder for China to ignore. It requires engaging in diplomacy and in international organizations, because where we've pulled back, China has filled in. It requires standing up for our values when human rights are abused in Xinjiang or when democracy is trampled in Hong Kong, because if we don't, China will act with even greater impunity. And it means investing in American workers, companies, and technologies, and insisting on a level playing field, because when we do, we can out-compete anyone.

These are the eight top foreign policy priorities of the Biden Administration. You may notice some things about that list.

First, important items are not on it. That doesn't mean they don't matter to us or that we won't work hard on them. Indeed, I look forward to setting out what we'll do on other vital pieces of our foreign policy in the days and weeks ahead.

But these priorities—the ones I've talked about today—are the most urgent, the ones on which we must make swift and sustained progress.

They're also all simultaneously domestic and foreign issues. And we've got to approach them that way, or we'll fall short. Beating COVID means vaccinating people at home and abroad. Winning in the global economy means making the right investments at home and pushing back against unfair trading practices by China and others. Dealing with climate change means investing in resilience and green energy here at home and leading a global effort to reduce carbon pollution.

More than at any other time in my career—maybe in my lifetime—distinctions between domestic and foreign policy have simply fallen away. Our domestic renewal and our strength in the world are completely entwined. And how we work will reflect that reality.

And finally, as the President has promised, diplomacy—not military action—will always come first.

Again, this is shaped by hard lessons learned. Americans are rightly wary of prolonged U.S. military interventions abroad. We've seen how they've often come—come at far too high a cost, both to us and to others. When we look back at the past decades of our military involvement in the world, especially in Afghanistan and the Middle East, we must remember what we've learned about the limits of force to build a durable peace; that the day after a major military intervention is always harder than we imagine; and how critical it is to pursue every possible avenue to a diplomatic solution.

Of course, we will never hesitate to use force when American lives and vital interests are at stake. That's why President Biden authorized an airstrike last

week against Iranian-backed militia groups targeting U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. But in that case—and in future cases when we must take military action—we will do so only when the objectives and mission are clear and achievable, consistent with our values and laws, and with the informed consent of the American people. And we'll do it together with diplomacy.

Finally, all our priorities go directly to our core sources of national strength. And we define “strength” broadly, because a truly strong country is strong in many ways at once. Real strength isn't bluster or bullying. And it's not based in military power alone. Real strength is that and more.

It's making sure our most valuable commodity as a nation—our human resources—can meet their full potential.

It's a flourishing democracy and an innovative and inclusive economy.

It's the ability to bring countries together because they trust us to lead, and no one can unite others like we can.

It's having our diplomats walk into buildings around the world and be respected because they have the confidence and trust of the American people.

And it means leading with our values. That's what I want to close on today.

At our best, the United States is a country with integrity and a heart. That's what makes us proud to be Americans and why so many people around the world have given everything to become Americans. That includes members of my own family, and many of your families, too.

The Biden Administration's foreign policy will reflect our values.

We will stand firm behind our commitments to human rights, democracy, the rule of law. And we'll stand up against injustice toward women and girls, LGBTQI people, religious minorities, and people of all races and ethnicities. Because all human beings are equal in rights and dignity, no matter where they live or who they are.

We will respect science and data, and we will fight misinformation and disinformation, because the truth is the cornerstone of our democracy.

We'll work with Congress whenever we can—on the take-off, not just the landing—because they represent the will of our people, and our foreign policy is stronger when the American people support it.

We'll build a national security workforce that reflects America in all its diversity because we're operating in a diverse world, and our diversity is a

unique source of strength that few countries can match. When we don't have a diverse team, it's like we're conducting diplomacy with one arm tied behind our back. This is a national security imperative and a personal priority for me.

We'll bring nonpartisanship back to our foreign policy. There was a time, as the saying goes, when politics stopped at the water's edge.² Secretaries of State didn't represent Democrats or Republicans. We represented all Americans. Some might think the idea is quaint now. Well, I don't. And the President doesn't either.

We will balance humility with confidence. I've always believed they should be the flip sides of America's leadership coin: humility because we aren't perfect, we don't have all the answers, and a lot of the world's problems aren't mainly about us, even as they affect us; but confidence because America at its best has a greater ability than any country on Earth to mobilize others for the common good and for the good of our people.

Above all, we'll hold ourselves accountable to a single, overarching measure of success: Are we delivering results for you? Are we making your lives more secure and creating opportunities for your families? Are we protecting the planet for your children and grandchildren? Are we honoring your values, and proving worthy of your trust?

It's the honor of my life to serve as your Secretary of State. And I'm aware every day that we're writing the next chapter of our history. It's up to us whether the story of this time will be one of peace and prosperity, security and equality; whether we will help more people in more places live in dignity and whether we will leave the United States stronger at home and in the world.

That's our mission. That's our opportunity. We will not squander it.

We serve the American people. And we will do everything we can to make you proud.

Thank you very much.

¹ Artful rhetorical figure combination of symplote and (catalogued) parallelism

² Phrase notably used Arthur Vandenberg in his 1947 *Address to the Cleveland Affairs Forum*. However, its origin dates at least as far back as 1904 and historically has been used in two senses. The first refers to the idea that America's domestic policies should reflect exclusively American interests and priorities.

The second sense—and the one invoked here by Blinken—refers to the idea that political party partisanship should be cast aside when dealing with foreign policy issues that affect America and Americans generally, such as when dealing cooperatively or adversarially with a foreign power. See also, the Vandenberg Resolution

[Source: State.gov.]



Document Analysis

Blinken's speech was delivered on March 3, 2021, in the Benjamin Franklin Room in the State Department before a sparse crowd due to the ongoing pandemic. Still, the speech is aimed at everyday Americans, whom Blinken acknowledges throughout the speech. In this way, the speech keeps its dual purpose in mind: a focus on a renewed international order while upholding the rights and values of American citizens. Blinken argues that the administration's foreign policy will in sum "make your lives more secure, create opportunity for you and your families, and tackle the global crises that are increasingly shaping your futures."

The top priorities outlined for the State Department are numerous and varied, but they all rely on international alliances and cooperation. The administration will combat climate change, implement immigration reform, and safeguard technology and privacy, among other initiatives. However, these issues are cast as both domestic and international imperatives. For example, in addressing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic through vaccination efforts, Blinken focuses on the idea of personal freedom through universal immunity: "None of us will be fully safe until the majority of the world is immune." This stress on American values is uniquely appealing to an American audience whom Blinken hopes to convince about the importance of international cooperation.

In a similar way, Blinken addresses past mistakes in foreign policy by contrasting current initiatives with those of previous administrations. The Trump administration is directly and indirectly invoked, with Blinken referencing family separation in the previous administration's immigration policy ("Cruelty, especially to children, is unacceptable.") and Trump's refusal to engage with the country's allies ("They're glad we're back."). Even the focus on combatting authoritarianism has recent implications, with the January 6 riots—in which a mob incited by former President Trump sought to overturn the counting of electoral votes for President-elect Biden—occurred only two months before this speech. Looking further back, Blinken refers to the Obama and George W. Bush administrations, which carried out poorly received

military interventions, particularly in the Middle East. Contrary to this history of overthrowing antagonistic regimes, Blinken focuses on encouraging democracies and democratic movements around the world: "[S]trong democracies are more stable, more open, better partners to us, more committed to human rights, less prone to conflict, and more dependable markets for our goods and services."

Most importantly, Blinken focuses on how these policies will have profound domestic consequences. While not directly in charge of any domestic policy—this was the duty of numerous other appendages of the Biden executive branch—Blinken aims to make his case on democratic and economic grounds. Coupled with the president's "build back better" policy (also the name of one of Biden's key legislative accomplishments), Blinken explains how strengthening the economy with a more global foothold will help American workers. This rhetorical angle is clear when ideas like "a flourishing democracy and an innovative and inclusive economy" are coupled together in the speech. In essence, international alliances ensure global security but also open new markets. This emphasis on economic principles is meant to appeal to everyday Americans who may be skeptical of a foreign policy that incorporates different international partners.

Blinken's speech ends with a discussion of American values at the center of these policies. While expressing humility and the importance of working with other countries on these issues, Blinken emphasizes that the United States is in a unique position to enact these ideas. By this rhetoric, Blinken seemingly has it both ways. Allies are crucial to American foreign policy, but the United States is the only one that can lead the charge. The idea of "balanc[ing] humility with confidence" remained a tenet of the Biden administration going forward, asserting American exceptionalism with an eye to international accord.

Essential Themes

Although Blinken presents the administration's foreign policy as forward-looking, it ultimately follows a tradition of international liberal development projects seen in numerous postwar administrations, both

Democrat and Republican. Following World War II, the U.S. government often sought to foment democratic values abroad. What is different in Blinken’s formulation is the stark contrast it makes with Trump’s “America First” approach. Trump viewed American might as ideally unconstrained in its pursuit of international order, while Blinken sees the value in agreement and cooperation, if with the United States still leading the way.

Throughout the Biden administration, the government’s foreign policy was not always viewed positively or as a renewal of normal relations. Focus on democracy was seen as an impediment in addressing issues as varied as China’s humanitarian record and the threats of climate change. Some viewed the international standing of the United States as permanently damaged. Biden’s Summit for Democracy (2021) and the Summit of the Americas (2022) were both criticized for which nations were allowed to participate. Additional stumbles detracted from the country’s reputation and the Biden’s foreign policy specifically.

The wide swath of issues in this speech spoke to the political moment; China, Russia, as well as social issues abroad and at home, would all affect the administration’s policies over the next four years. However, honoring alliances was not always a clear-cut proposition, especially in how it was received by other nations or Americans back home. For example, the American military’s exit from Afghanistan in 2021 was theoretically in line with Blinken’s ideas here (honoring agreements, avoiding needless foreign entanglements), but its uncoordinated implementation irked many allies. Several complained that they had not been consulted about the specifics of the withdrawal.

The alliance with Ukraine was honored after Russia’s invasion in 2022 with sanctions and promised military aid, but the Biden administration was not able to point to any headway in the Ukrainian cause with the war still ongoing by mid-2025. Finally, the Israel-Hamas War that began in October 2023 saw Blinken working tirelessly to secure a ceasefire, all the while guaranteeing ongoing military aid for Israel, with many protesting this support throughout 2024 and 2025.

—Chris Bingley, PhD

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