

PERSPECTIVE

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Thailand’s Chairmanship of ASEAN: Unshackling Thai Diplomacy and Charting the Association’s Way Forward

*Sihesak Phuanketkeow and Supalak Ganjanakhundee**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- When Thailand took over the chairmanship of ASEAN from Singapore at the end of 2018, the country was faced with the twin challenge of managing its political transition and steering ASEAN during a period of fundamental shifts in the region’s strategic landscape.
- Under the theme of “Advancing Partnership for Sustainability”, Thailand’s chairmanship was notable for the successful conclusion of negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the unveiling of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and progress towards the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.
- Disappointments included the absence of US President Donald Trump at the year-end ASEAN-related summits, the lack of progress in solving the festering Rohingya crisis, and the limited space for engagement with civil society in the ASEAN process.
- Looking ahead, the achievements and progress made during Thailand’s chairmanship will need to be built upon. The concept of a “people-centered ASEAN” must also be central to the ASEAN Way. ASEAN will also have to act upon its much-touted centrality in the regional order by constructively engaging all the major powers and seeking constructive engagement among its member states.
- As demonstrated during its chairmanship, an unshackled Thai diplomacy will go a long way in contributing to a strong and vigorous ASEAN.

** Sihesak Phuanketkeow, former Permanent Secretary of Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is Visiting Senior Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and Mr Supalak Ganjanakhundee is Visiting Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute and former editor of The Nation (Bangkok).*

INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of the 35th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok on 4 November 2019, and in accordance with ASEAN tradition, Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha presented the ceremonial gavel to the head of government of the incoming chair, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc. Officially, Viet Nam will only assume the position on 1 January 2020. While it included many laudable achievements and some notable disappointments, at least from the Thai perspective, Thailand's ASEAN chairmanship ended on a positive note. The hope was that it would enhance the credibility of the five-month-old elected government of General Prayut at home and help restore international confidence in Thailand, which had eroded during the period of political turmoil and then military rule that began in 2014.

The buoyant mood contrasted sharply with the sense of ambivalence that prevailed when Thailand assumed the chairmanship at the beginning of 2019. The country was at that time still mired in domestic political uncertainty, as it headed towards its first democratic elections in eight years.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO GET THAI FOREIGN POLICY BACK ON TRACK

As the second largest economy in ASEAN and a founding member of the regional organization, Thailand had been one of the main anchors of ASEAN and at one time was at the forefront of democracy in the region. But, as Thai politics became more chaotic, leading to military intervention in May 2014 and five years of military rule, Thailand's regional and international role became greatly handicapped. Therefore, when Thailand's turn came to chair ASEAN, there were concerns about whether the vicissitudes of Thai politics would impair its ability to lead the association at a time when leadership was sorely needed. The shifting geo-economics and geo-politics of the region — stemming from rising tensions among major powers, the escalating trade war between the U.S. and China, the rise in trade protectionism, and the decline of multilateralism — posed formidable internal and external tests for ASEAN.

Thailand's assumption of the ASEAN chairmanship also brought back memories of the debacle that had occurred in April 2009, when Thailand had to cancel the ASEAN Summit. Anti-government protesters had stormed the venue of the ASEAN Summit in Pattaya and forced the evacuation of all the national leaders present. This time around, Thailand was determined to avoid a repeat of history and went to great length to put its house in order, even to the extent of delaying the ASEAN Summit until June, after the country held parliamentary elections and the ceremony marking the coronation of the new monarch. Thailand's determination to ensure that its chairmanship would proceed smoothly and as successfully as possible also stemmed from its ambition to put Thai diplomacy back on track.

The Thai chair chose "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability" as its theme. The country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs used the catch-phrase "The Sustainability of Things" to capture this theme in all its breadth. In fact, it was a forgone conclusion, even among the young diplomats at the ministry, that Thailand's theme would revolve around the concept of sustainability. This was because advancing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) had for some time been the country's main foreign policy platform, as was evident when it chaired the Group of 77 in 2016 in New York and when it campaigned — albeit unsuccessfully — for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Thailand sought to be at the forefront of promoting the SDGs both internationally and regionally as a means of showcasing the “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy” (SEP) of His Majesty the late King Bhumibol. The well-known mantra of Thai foreign policy was the so-called “SEP for SDGs”, based on the premise that the SEP advocates moderation and balance in life and livelihood, which the Thais considered to be a key component of efforts to achieve the SDGs.

The theme “Advancing Partnership for Sustainability” comprised three major components. “Advancing” meant moving ASEAN towards a future-oriented community.¹ “Partnership” meant forging strong partnerships both within ASEAN and with external partners to ensure seamless connectivity,² while “Sustainability” embraced all its dimensions – peace, security and development – with a view to ensuring ASEAN centrality and a people-centered ASEAN Community.³ In the ASEAN lexicon of abbreviations, the 3Cs – community, connectivity and centrality – have served as a strategic guidepost for charting the association’s way forward.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND DELIVERABLES

Under the Thai chairmanship, issues such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the crisis in Myanmar’s Rakhine State dominated headlines in the media. But several other substantive issues also deserve to be highlighted. The following discussion covers work concluded on some of those issues during the Thai chairmanship of ASEAN.

Towards a Digital ASEAN

According to the World Economic Forum, ASEAN’s digital economy will grow significantly over the next ten years, adding an estimated US\$1 trillion to the regional GDP.⁴ With the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and technology advancing rapidly towards 5G, ASEAN’s economic integration can only proceed in conjunction with digital integration. As ASEAN Chair, Thailand continued to build on the association’s progress in preparing the member states for the era of disruptive technologies. To this end, two important documents were adopted, namely the ASEAN Declaration on Industrial Transformation to Industry 4.0⁵ and the Digital Integration Framework Action Plan 2019-2025.⁶ The latter calls for the development of an ASEAN Innovation Roadmap.

On the other hand, digitalization also exposes countries to a range of cybersecurity threats. To counteract these, the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre was set up in Thailand to enhance cybersecurity awareness, strengthen information security and data protection, and promote information sharing.

Embedding the SDGs into the ASEAN Development Agenda

Thailand had spearheaded efforts to align the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 with the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or the so-called “Complementarities Initiative”,⁷ even before it took up the chairmanship of ASEAN. The Thai chair also hosted a “Special Lunch on Sustainable Development” on the sidelines of the 35th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits. The Managing Director of IMF, Kristalina Georgieva, was among those who attended this lunch. Furthermore, Thailand funded the establishment of the

ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogues in Bangkok, launched at the 35th ASEAN Summit.⁸ Another much-welcomed initiative was the “Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in ASEAN Region”, adopted by the ASEAN Leaders in June.⁹ As with the haze, marine pollution, especially as reflected in indiscriminate disposal of plastic wastes, has become a serious transboundary threat to the marine environment and to life in the entire ASEAN region. ASEAN has come under international criticism for its complacency in the face of this looming crisis. The high-profile deaths of a number of whales over the past year gave further urgency to the call for action. ASEAN’s collective response, as spelled out under in the Declaration on Combating Marine Debris, was lauded by regional and international environmental organizations. In a related initiative focused on conserving marine resources, Thailand also succeeded in rallying the other ASEAN countries for the establishment of the ASEAN Network for Combating Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing. Thailand’s success in making this possible drew on the country’s experience in working with the European Union on illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Connecting the Connectivities

Enhancing regional connectivity in all its dimensions, or ‘seamless connectivity’, has long been one of ASEAN’s main priorities as it works towards economic integration. Thailand has taken a leading role in this regard, given its central geographical location in Mainland Southeast Asia and the Mekong sub-region. In fact, the major North-South and East-West economic and transport corridors in the sub-region converge in Thailand. Ever since Thai Prime Minister General Chatchai Choonhavan made the famous pronouncement of turning “the battlefields of Indochina into market places” in 1988, successive Thai governments have aspired to transform the country into an economic, transport and logistics hub for Mainland Southeast Asia.

In addition to advancing the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025, Thailand has also been a driving force for strengthening connectivity in the Mekong sub-region under the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) framework. Thailand initiated that framework in 2003, during the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra.

As part of the MPAC 2025, the World Bank has assisted in preparing a list of 19 high-quality and “bankable” infrastructure projects in ASEAN that would qualify for financing from the private sector and from international agencies. Under the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund, two new financing mechanisms have been set up, namely the “Inclusive Finance Facility” and “ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility”.

As ASEAN Chair, Thailand worked to expound the concept of “Connecting the Connectivities” which was highlighted at the 22nd ASEAN Plus Three Summit in Bangkok on 4 November 2019.¹⁰ The objective is to link MPAC 2025 with all ongoing connectivity initiatives in the region — such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan’s Quality Infrastructure Partnership and the Republic of Korea’s New Southern Policy — with a view towards creating synergies and building momentum for broader regional economic integration.

Strengthening ASEAN Centrality

Under Thailand's chairmanship, bringing about progress in the RCEP negotiations, forging a common position on the Indo-Pacific concept, and moving forward with the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea were given high priority.

Negotiations to achieve “a modern, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement”¹¹ and to establish the biggest trading bloc in the world, comprising ten ASEAN countries and six partners, have dragged on for seven years. According to the ASEAN Integration Report 2019, “collectively, RCEP represents 47.4% of global population, 29.2% of global trade, and 32.2% of global output in 2018”.¹² As it turned out, negotiations were reinvigorated in the face of the trade war between China and the U.S. and its spillover effects on the global trading system. Thailand was given credit for injecting further momentum into the talks by doubling the number of negotiation sessions during the year of its ASEAN Chairmanship. A flurry of late-night, eleventh-hour negotiations took place during the 35th ASEAN Summit, and a conclusion was finally reached on all 20 chapters of the text of the RCEP agreement. It was unfortunate that at the final hour Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided that India could not join the RCEP under the terms negotiated, saying that India's outstanding issues and concerns had not been addressed satisfactorily. The remaining 15 countries intend to proceed.

Since the countries concerned will need time to complete various internal procedures, the signing the agreement will await Vietnam's chairmanship in 2020. In effect, India will have time to work together with the 15 other participating countries to resolve outstanding issues and to come to its final decision on joining RCEP. It is hoped that India will eventually come around and join the RCEP. An agreement that embraces all the 16 countries will certainly go a long way in stemming the tides of protectionism and the erosion of the rules-based multilateral trading system.

On the concept of the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN took more than a year to deliberate its position, not least because of divergent views among the member states. These differences were due to member states' calculation of their respective national interests and relationships with the major powers. In spite of some initial ambivalence and misgivings, ASEAN was spurred to flesh out its thinking on the Indo-Pacific in light of the emergence of various versions of the Indo-Pacific idea. Japan, Australia and India, to varying degrees, have put forth their own visions of the Indo-Pacific. But it was not until U.S. President Donald Trump announced his country's free and open Indo-Pacific Strategy that ASEAN began to feel the added pressure resulting from heightened geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China. The U.S. initiative was taken in response to China's growing influence and to what Washington sees as the possibility of a China-centric regional order under the BRI.

Confronted with such compelling circumstances, ASEAN had to navigate its way forward and come up with its own strategy on the concept of the Indo-Pacific or risk putting the association's centrality at stake.

As ASEAN Chair, Thailand began working closely with the Indonesian side in putting up a first draft of ASEAN's position. The Thai side exerted its bridge-building role and, eventually, a consensus among ASEAN Member States was hammered out. This consensus led to the adoption of the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP) at the 34th ASEAN Summit in June.¹³ Upon close scrutiny, the AOIP reflects the so-called “ASEAN Way” in its adherence to the association's traditional norms and principles and its reliance on existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, particularly the East Asia Summit (EAS). The AOIP also emphasizes functional cooperation in the areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity, the

UN's Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and economic cooperation. On the whole, the AOIP underscores ASEAN's determination to maintain ASEAN centrality and to shape the concept of the Indo-Pacific to ensure that ASEAN is not caught in a situation of having to choose sides in any major power rivalry. Analysts hold different views regarding the AOIP, but it seems that the best description is that the AOIP is "old wine in a new bottle."¹⁴ Having adopted the AOIP, ASEAN cannot rest on its laurels and must actively pursue wider support for its concept of the Indo-Pacific.

The issue of the South China Sea has long been one of the most contentious at every high-level meeting of ASEAN. But the Thai chair can rightly claim that, compared to previous years, the discussions over the course of 2019 and especially at the 35th ASEAN Summit were rather restrained. While "some concerns" over Chinese land reclamation and other activities were "taken note of", much of the text concerning the South China Sea in the Chairman's Statement on that summit were devoted to perceived progress in negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, most notably the completion of the first reading of the Single Draft of the negotiation text.¹⁵ China's more accommodating position on the Code of Conduct is obviously part of an effort to woo ASEAN, as the rivalry between China and the U.S. heightens. But those who know the history of the long and winding discussions on the Code between China and ASEAN have no doubt that a final outcome is still a long way off. Substantive negotiation has not yet begun, and sensitive issues, such as the Code's geographical coverage and its legal status, are major hurdles yet to be overcome.

A further highlight of the Thai chairmanship was the holding of the ASEAN-Republic of Korea (ROK) Commemorative Summit in Busan 25-26 November. The summit celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the ASEAN-ROK dialogue partnership. The gathering also saw the first Mekong-ROK Summit, held on 27 November. These meetings served to showcase the ROK's New Southern Policy, which aims to promote cooperation with ASEAN in all areas on the basis of the common and shared values of 3Ps — People, Prosperity and Peace. This initiative made clear that, in the context of ASEAN Plus Three, the ROK did not want to be any less important a partner to ASEAN than China or Japan.

SOME DISAPPOINTMENTS

Thailand had hoped that President Trump would attend the series of summits held in November in Bangkok as his attendance would have highlighted Thailand's status as the oldest treaty ally of the U.S. in Asia, not to mention scoring political points for Prime Minister Prayut. The president's no-show at ASEAN's most important leaders' gathering for a second consecutive year did little to instill confidence in the U.S. commitment to ASEAN or its engagement with the region under the Indo-Pacific Strategy. ASEAN leaders certainly did not take well the fact that the U.S. delegation was led by the recently appointed National Security Advisor, Robert O'Brien, who is not of cabinet rank. In what appeared as a snub to the U.S. side, most of ASEAN Leaders decided not to attend the concurrent ASEAN-U.S. summit session in Bangkok and sent their foreign ministers over instead. Only the Thai prime minister, as the current ASEAN Chair; the Vietnamese prime minister, as the incoming chair; and the Laotian prime minister as the country coordinator for ASEAN-U.S. dialogue relations were present. Even the invitation from President Trump, as conveyed by O'Brien, for the ASEAN leaders to attend a special summit in the U.S. in the first quarter of next year did not help to assuage ASEAN's disappointment to any significant degree. The feeling was that it would take more than an opportunity for a group photo with President Trump for the ASEAN Leaders to travel all the way to the U.S.

The Rohingya crisis has been a frustrating issue for ASEAN, causing considerable friction among member states. Indonesia and Malaysia, both predominantly Muslim countries, have been most vocal in expressing their concerns. Each of these governments has come under pressure from their domestic constituencies and from fellow members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). While understanding the sensitivity of the situation in Rakhine State, ASEAN as an association could not help being concerned about Myanmar's inability to come to grips with the crisis, with its spillover effects on neighbouring countries and the negative impact on ASEAN's image. Given the limitations imposed by ASEAN's adherence to the principle of non-interference in member states' internal affairs, the association has had to confine its role to providing humanitarian assistance. It has also dispatched a team of experts to undertake a preliminary needs assessment to help prepare for the eventual repatriation of Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh back to Rakhine State. Nonetheless, some progress was made on the humanitarian front during Thailand's chairmanship with the agreement to establish a special *ad hoc* support team within the ASEAN Secretariat to oversee the implementation of the recommendations arising from the needs assessment report, in the areas of facilitating the repatriation process and promoting sustainable development in Rakhine State. At the year's two summits, both ASEAN and other leaders expressed their continuing concern with the situation in Rakhine State. Yet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had little to say about Myanmar's efforts to address the root cause of the crisis and create conducive conditions for the safe and dignified return of displaced Rohingyas.

The phrase "people-centered ASEAN" has appeared in every important declaration, statement and document issued by the association in recent years. During Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship, "people issues" such as aging societies, the rights of persons with disabilities, migrant workers and issues pertaining to women and children — including education for out-of-school children — continued to be addressed. Worthy of mention, in particular, is the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Active Aging and Innovation in Thailand.

Regrettably, when it comes to the participation of "the people" in the ASEAN process, much more needs to be done. The voice of civil society organizations (CSOs) is hardly heard in any ASEAN gathering, let alone at ASEAN Summits. To its credit, Thailand did make an attempt to bring about an interface between ASEAN foreign ministers and leaders of CSOs. However, only the foreign ministers of Thailand and Malaysia attended, while the rest of the member states were represented by senior officials. Two member states chose to send representatives from neither their governments nor CSOs.

CONCLUSION

Under Thailand's Chairmanship, ASEAN continued charting the way forward in its community building and addressing the challenges that have put ASEAN centrality to the test. Many of the year's achievements are still works in progress, be they the RCEP or the AOIP. The progress made has, however, demonstrated that, when ASEAN mobilizes its collective efforts and strengths, it can make a big difference. With the strategic landscape in a state of flux, ASEAN must be more proactive in forging ahead, not just reacting but instead shaping events. ASEAN cannot just claim centrality; it must also act on its centrality.

Challenges in the external environment require ASEAN to also strengthen itself from within. The "ASEAN Way" needs to be applied against the reality of the growing interdependence among ASEAN member states. As demonstrated by the Rohingya crisis,

ASEAN's cardinal principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states should not preclude those states from constructively engaging with one other on matters that may fall within the sovereignty of one country but have ramifications for other countries and for ASEAN as a whole. Finding ASEAN's inner strength also means not leaving ordinary people out of the ASEAN process. The concept of people-centered development must be more than a slogan reiterated at every ASEAN summit meeting.

Looking ahead, sustainable development requires sustainable peace under the concept of the "Sustainability of Things" that the Thai chair avidly advocated. But building strategic trust is easier said than done, not least in a climate of growing strategic mistrust. To be sure, China and the U.S. must manage their ties better and seek a new equilibrium in their relationship. But ASEAN must also do its part by developing and sending out the clear message that it wants to engage constructively with all the major powers and to see constructive engagement among them for the sake of peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

As the chair of ASEAN over the past year, Thailand deserves credit for facing up to the challenge of managing its difficult political transition even while steering ASEAN on a steady course forward through turbulent seas. Thai politics, now in a post-election period, is itself still finding its way forward. In the meantime, Thai foreign policy under an elected government must keep up the momentum and build on its successful chairmanship of ASEAN. A strong and vigorous ASEAN requires that Thailand continue to demonstrate, in even greater measure, the active diplomacy that was amply displayed during its chairmanship of ASEAN.

¹ ASEAN-Thailand, "Why 'Advancing'? The Case for ASEAN Preparing for the Future — The Long Term Future", n.d. (<https://www.asean2019.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/dc3bdea2a7a5ed39fd1e714ea3fba7f9-1.pdf>, downloaded 10 December 2019).

² ASEAN-Thailand, "Why 'Partnership'? The Case for Enduring Engagement of the ASEAN Community with the Global Community of Nations", n.d. (<https://www.asean2019.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ab785657dd17f9c1e224c19925922ada.pdf>, downloaded 10 December 2019).

³ Ibid.

⁴ World Economic Forum, "Digital ASEAN", 2019 (<https://www.weforum.org/projects/digital-asean>, downloaded 6 December 2019).

⁵ "ASEAN Declaration on Industrial Transformation to Industry 4.0", 2 November 2019 (<https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/1-issued-ASEAN-DECLARATION-ON-INDUSTRIAL-TRANSFORMATION-TO-INDUSTRY-4.pdf>, downloaded 19 December 2019).

⁶ "ASEAN Digital Integration Framework Action Plan", 2019-2025, n.d. (<https://asean.org/storage/2019/01/ASEAN-Digital-Integration-Framework.pdf>, downloaded 19 December 2019).

⁷ ASEAN-Thailand, "Why 'Sustainability'? The Case for Promoting the 'Sustainability of Things' as an ASEAN Strategic Priority", n.d. (<https://www.asean2019.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/83b614836442e8aa79a7f7b7bf1b7291.pdf>, downloaded 19 December 2019).

⁸ "Chairman's Press Statement on the Launch of the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue", 3 November 2019 (<https://www.asean2019.go.th/en/news/chairmans->

[press-statement-on-the-launch-of-the-asean-centre-for-sustainable-development-studies-and-dialogue-acdsd/](#), downloaded 30 November 2019).

⁹ “Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris”, 22 June 2019

(<https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/2.-Bangkok-Declaration-on-Combating-Marine-Debris-in-ASEAN-Region-FINAL.pdf>, downloaded 30 November 2019).

¹⁰ “ASEAN Plus Three Leaders’ Statement on Connecting the Connectivities Initiative”, 4 November 2019 (<https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/Finalised-APT-Leaders-Statement-on-Connecting-Connectivities-Initiative.pdf>, downloaded 16 December 2019).

¹¹ “Joint Leaders’ Statement on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)”, 4 November 2019 (<https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/FINAL-RCEP-Joint-Leaders-Statement-for-3rd-RCEP-Summit.pdf>, downloaded 16 December 2019).

¹² “ASEAN Integration Report 2019”, p. 142 (<https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/ASEAN-integration-report-2019.pdf>, downloaded 16 December 2019).

¹³ “The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, n.d. (https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf, downloaded 19 December 2019).

¹⁴ Hoang Thi Ha, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Old Wine in New Bottle?” *ISEAS Perspective*, 25 June 2019

(https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_51.pdf, downloaded 17 December 2019).

¹⁵ “Chairman’s Statement of the 35th ASEAN Summit”, 3 November 2019, p. 17

(<https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/Chairs-Statement-of-the-35th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf>, downloaded 17 December 2019).

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