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FEDERALISM AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA

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A. INTRODUCTION

Federalism and National Security in Nigeria are supposed to be mutually reinforcing. While a healthy and balanced federalism tends to guarantee the sustenance of the value of national security, an unhealthy and lopsided federalism tends to generate intense acrimony and hostility amongst the federating units which are potential sources of threat to the nation's security. In a heterogeneous society such as Nigeria, policy choices are capable of generating dissenting opinions from the policy-conscious public and those dissenting opinions usually reflect the ethnic diversity of the society. The diversity that characterizes the Nigeria society has, instead of being an enduring source of strength, been a great source of strain and weakness. With the exception of the tenuous collective resolve that characterized the politics of decolonization in Nigeria, both the ruling elite and the masses have hardly felt the crucial imperative of appreciating issues from nationalistic prism.

Federalism in Nigeria lacks the critical sustaining element of cooperation among the federating units. This lack of cooperation is derived, in large part, from the perceived and sometimes, manifest socio-economic and power imbalances among the constituent units which have considerable potential for generating acrimony rather than harmony in their interactions. It is against this backdrop that the violent protest of the Ogoni people in Rivers State against their perceived neglect, should be appreciated.

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However, given the fact that the security of any social formation is heavily dependent on the internal social cohesion that characterizes the society, this very condition is apparently lacking in Nigeria. Certain common objective factors like political stability, internal social cohesion, solid and sound economic base, a contented citizenry, a visionary and purposeful leadership, a responsive government, well-disciplined and cohesive military formation, among others, constitute the credible foundation upon which the value of national security is predicated. In this sense, a nation's security is the expression of its confidence to enjoy the support and loyalty of its citizenry both in time of peace and national emergency. And this could only be guaranteed through meeting the basic essentials of the populace and fairness in the distribution of scarce resources in a federal arrangement. The government of a state that is widely perceived as insensitive and unresponsive to the needs and aspirations of her people, is more predisposed to pursuing, with maximum vigour, the security of the regime in power through military means. In other words, the concept of national security within the Nigerian context is largely appreciated from the perspective of regime survival and legitimation.

However, in this paper, we intend to probe deeply into the relationship between federalism and national security and how they exert mutual influence on each other. The paper argues that, the practice of a 'balanced' federation enhances the value of national security and this in turn, strengthens the dynamics of the federal arrangement. Since the value of national security is increasingly being conceptualized from the harmony of interest, any federal arrangement that facilitates this value, is deemed to be equally facilitative of the task of maintaining and sustaining national security. Certain conceptual questions are inevitable in examining the dialectical relationship between federalism and national security in Nigeria. These include among others: What is the nature and character of federalism in Nigeria? What have been the impact of military rule on Nigeria's federal arrangement? What has been the conception of national security from the government and leadership point of view?

We advance the following propositions to guide us: We suggest that:

- a) the structure of Nigeria's federalism, perhaps, because of the domineering posture of the military in the political arena, has hardly promoted internal national cohesion which is a very salient factor in the maintenance and sustenance of the value of national security;
- b) the 'maladministration' of federalism in Nigeria has set the citizens at odds with the state as the case of Ogoni people amply demonstrates;
- c) the forces of disunity that characterize the civil society had crept into the military which is often seen as a symbol of national unity;
- d) The dynamics of federalism in Nigeria has not adequately addressed the 'national' question and thus, the growing widespread cry of marginalisation, domination and neglect of the minorities by governments seen as under control of the majorities in Nigeria.

B. FEDERALISM AND NATIONAL SECURITY

A general consensus seems to be crystallizing behind the view that federalism is adopted as a technique for managing conflicts, by societies that are manifestly characterized by multiplicity of ethnic groups. Eleazu conceives of federalism as a "means where similarities are harmonized and differences accommodated."¹ This definition of federalism by Eleazu suggests in unambiguous terms that it is a structural arrangement adopted to ensure maintenance of peaceful coexistence by the diverse ethnic groups. This arrangement is widely considered as best suited for managing pluralistic societies because of the multiple-centres of power that can be located in the society and guarantees the federating units some sense of belonging. In other words federalism entails creating multiple structures of government, each of which is granted some degree of autonomy to enable it function effectively.

Vincent Ostrom views federalism as referring to a "division of political authority between states and a central government, each having the final say regarding matters belonging to its sphere."² This suggests that a political system organized under the framework of federalism must have several units with a central unit primarily responsible for promoting their

common interests. While the federating units evolve policies and give practical expression to these policies to foster development in their respective spheres of jurisdiction, the central or federal government evolves policies to defend and promote national interests and also, creates an enabling environment for accommodating diversity and fostering national unity. This is often done through institution-building where the composition of personnel is done in such a way that is reflective of federal character. Since perceived socio-economic disparities among the constituent units could be an essential factor for federating, it is therefore crucially imperative for a federal system of government to provide adequate welfare measures for all units of the government in order to assure a balanced development of the country.³ Federalism thus represents a compromise arrangement whereby power is deliberately and consciously shared between the centre and the federating units.⁴

Federalism is therefore an ultimate expression of the mutual consent of the component units to come together not as superior and subordinate but as coordinate and independent units that work cooperatively towards achieving common goals in the interest of all. As Aaron Wildarsky observes, federalism is about cooperation which requires mutuality not hierarchy, sharing instead of monopoly of power.⁵ For a federal arrangement to work efficaciously, it requires the values of mutual trust and confidence, cooperation, tolerance, and above all the capacity to generate a national consensus on an issue of vital interest and to sustain it.⁶ The **Federalist paper** identifies as one of the most salient factors or determinants of federalism, the desire to provide and guarantee ample security for the whole federating units which none of them can individually undertake against external attack.⁷ This emphasis on security as one of the crucial determinants of federalism is largely because of the 'instrumental' nature of this value. Development hardly takes place in an environment that is widely perceived as insecure. This perhaps, underscores the imperative of fostering harmonious relationships among diverse social groups so as to guarantee the loyalty and support of these groups when there is external or internal threat to the corporate existence of the nation.

However, it is worth appreciating the fact that a very cooperative, responsive, equitable and accountable federal arrangement creates an atmosphere of harmony and mutual trust among the federating units which

to a considerable extent, generates a conducive climate of internal cohesion appropriate for the maintenance of security. One very salient factor about national security is the general social condition of the society in question. How are people organized? Is government always sensitive and responsive to the legitimate demands of its citizenry? Are resources relatively equitably distributed in the society? Does relative harmony characterize the relationship between government and the people on the one hand, and among the diverse ethnic groups on the other? These are salient questions which are relevant to the national security of a given social formation. One of the most critical and strategic factors in national security consideration is the relationship between the state and the citizens. Barry Buzan persuasively notes that 'where state and citizens are severely at odds, domestic disarray may threaten the coherence of the state in ways that make the interest of national security difficult to achieve.'⁸

Aforka Nweke reinforces this position by noting that a state is secure only when the aggregate of the people organized under it has consciousness of belonging to a common sovereign political community, enjoy equal political freedom, human rights, economic opportunities, social justice, etc.⁹ The adoption of any system of organization is significantly guided by the crucial imperative of fostering peaceful, harmonious and mutually beneficial co-existence among diverse cultural collectivities. The national security of any social formation is the expression of the degree of confidence of its citizenry. There is therefore a relationship between federalism and national security. While a federal system that guarantees a balanced development among the component units is relatively secure, the one that does not, breeds a climate of "mutual mistrust that renders the society highly prone to violent explosions that could threaten its survival right to the foundation".¹⁰

Eme Awa also underscores the point that "creating a community with common values is an arduous task if there are extremes of wealth and poverty among the units of the federation."¹¹ Federalism therefore, must seek to redress all forms of either manifest or perceived socio-economic and political disparities or imbalances among the constituent units. When such imbalances grow so pronounced, it stratifies the society both horizontally and vertically thus posing a monumental threat to social cohesion that is germane to an orderly and secure polity. Pronounced

imbalance sets the lower levels of government severely at odds with the centre and engenders deep-seated hostility by one group or the other cohabiting the same community.

C. **FEDERALISM AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA**

The relationship between federalism and national security in Nigeria can better be appreciated against the backdrop of popular perception of the configurative elements of federalism. These configurative elements of federalism include: power sharing, autonomy, resource distribution, minority rights, etc. The management of these determine the state of security or otherwise of the nation. We shall now examine these one by one to see the extent to which they threaten national security:

a) **Federalism and power sharing in Nigeria:**

There is a widespread feeling that something is faulty about the way the federal system operates in Nigeria. Ignatius A. Ayua identifies this as the standard of administration of our federal system which he claims is poor and has resoundingly failed to inspire in the minds of our people a sense of national unity, of feeling of oneness and unity in diversity. Instead of creating a sense of fulfillment, it has created a sense of frustration and in some cases a feeling of being left out from the mainstream of national life thereby threatening the unity of the country.¹² It is hardly in doubt that any federal system that is manifestly characterized by social cleavages on account of lack of fairness and equity as guiding principles of resources allocation will necessarily be vulnerable to both internal and external subversive tendencies. This is because the mobilization of loyalty, patriotism and sense of nationalism of the citizenry can hardly be effectively done.

Indeed, the above preliminary remark about the relationship between federalism and national security in Nigeria has brought into sharp focus, certain structural and operational imperfections which characterize the dynamics of the Nigerian federal arrangement. At its formative stage the system was made up of three regions with three dominant ethnic groups (Hausa-Fulani, Ibo and Yoruba) each laying claims to its' own part of Nigeria. However, one of these three regions was widely perceived to be two times bigger than the size of the other two put together. The Northern region of the country as a political bloc was so big that it

threatened the competitive strength of the Western and Eastern region put together. Analysts believe that the collapse of the first republic soon after independence could partly be blamed on this structural imbalance. This point is well articulated by Yakubu Gowon who, as a participant observer, had the privilege of acquiring a masterly grasp of the dynamics of Nigeria's federalism. He observed that:

the component parts of the federation were such that one of the regions was bigger than the other two put together in population as well as in size. This very fact was contributory to the instability of the country. This provided the rationale for a review of the federal structure.¹³

It is imperative to note that deriving from this single structural imbalance were some threats to the nation's corporate existence as one and indivisible entity. One of these was the bloody coup that was widely seen as a violent expression of the growing discontent by some military officers of a particular region (the East) with the obvious advantaged position of the North in the political power equation of Nigeria. The Major Nzeogwu - led coup of 15 January 1966 could hardly be understood from any point of view than that it was military violence deliberately targeted at the Northern political elite in government, especially as statistics of those assassinated during the coup amply supports this view point. The successful prosecution of this Eastern military officers' coup on the 15th January, 1966, saw the emergence of General Aguiyi-Ironsi as the Head of State and Supreme Commander on January 17, 1966.

As if the one-sided killings of both military and civilian leaders from the North was not enough to placate the incensed Igbo military officers, the promulgation of Decree No 34 of 1966 pronouncing the unification of Nigeria by General Aguiyi-Ironsi posed a significant and overwhelming threat to Nigeria's security. This policy decision of Ironsi was perceived with suspicions by other Nigerians while favouring the Igbos who felt they had not had enough of their fair share of national power. This policy unleashed some centrifugal forces that ultimately culminated in a counter coup on 29th July, 1966 that claimed the lives of General Ironsi and other Igbo officers thereby leading to the assumption

of the mantle of leadership by Lt Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the Head of State and Supreme Commander. This development in turn, generated intense hostility from the Eastern part of the country. The civil war which lasted from 1967 to 1970 was an expression of the hostility and discontent of the Igbos with the counter-coup which installed Gowon as the Head of State.

It is clear from the above that the structural imbalance that characterized Nigeria's federal system in the First Republic was a potent threat to the security of the country from the point of view of its corporate and functional survival. It should be recalled that this structural imbalance gave the north half the parliamentary seats and guaranteed its hold on power at the centre. However, General Gowon realising the disability which made it impossible for Aguiyi-Ironsi to proceed, replaced the retrogressive unification Decree 34 of 1966. New structures were created to replace the four existing regions. The creation of the 12 states by Gowon was seen then as an effective way of allaying the fears of both the West and East about the vastness of the Northern region as a geopolitical bloc and deny secessionist Biafra of the support of Eastern minorities. However, one enduring reality about Nigeria's federal arrangement is the perception by both the Eastern and the Western sections of the country that are still incapacitated politically because of their growing sense of inability to capture political power at the centre. This according to them is derived from the populous nature of the Northern section which makes it hardly possible for them to compete favourably for political power.

Another very significant point about threat to national security resulting from the perception of domination by one particular section of the country was of course, the late Major Gideon Orkar's aborted but bloody coup of 1990. The coup broadcast by Major Orkar no doubt generated some mixed feelings, not least because of his claim that the coup was executed on behalf of the patriotic and well meaning peoples of the middle-Belt and the Southern parts of the Country. For the first time in the history of Nigeria some military officers openly challenged the status-quo and made a case for some sections of the country widely considered to be always at the receiving end of the system. The "excision" of five Northern states from the federation was an obvious pointer to the fact that power, whether under a civilian or military dispensation, was considered to be dominated by people of these states. This very expression

of discontent with the federal arrangement by military officers who are looked upon as symbol of national unity and custodians of cherished national values, cast considerable doubt upon the viability of Nigeria's survival as one and united indivisible entity. Indeed, given the scope and intensity of the confusion and chaos generated by the attempted coup, one would not be far from the truth to hypothesize that if the coup had succeeded, perhaps we would have been talking of something else other than one Nigeria. This singular event brought into sharp focus, the fragile and vulnerable nature of the nation's federal system on account of growing dissatisfaction with both the structural and functional imperatives of the system.

That the military could make public, sharp factionalization along primordial considerations is ominous for a young nation that is still in search of nationhood. The military institution which claims to be the symbol of national unity and instrument for galvanizing the diverse cultural collectivities into a united entity, has become so precariously bedevilled with what one would refer to as the civil society virus. However, we must concede the point that the Major Orkar's attempted-coup of April 1990 had quite undoubtedly sensitized Nigerians to the urgent imperative of administering the federal system in a way that should give every section of the country a sense of belonging and psychological feeling of having a stake in the continued survival of Nigeria as a one indivisible entity. One would however say with a degree of accuracy that the prolonged and aberrative presence of the military in the nation's political arena has contributed significantly to the maladministration of federalism in Nigeria. Orkar's coup broadcast had demonstrated in clear terms the structural and operational deficiencies of the Nigerian federation which has considerable potential for undermining the nation's foundation of national capability and resolve. This invariably suggests that people derive more socio-economic benefits from the state than from the federal government, and would therefore, readily support the state rather than the centre. The danger inherent in this attitudinal disposition is that when the nation is faced with external aggression, the task of national mobilization for collective defence might not be effective enough.

b) **Federalism and Autonomy of the Federating Units:**

Structurally, Nigeria's federal arrangement could be faulted on account of its over-centralization which negates the principles of

coordinate and "independent" coexistence of both the central government and the constituent parts. This tendency of over-centralizing Nigeria's federalism is largely as a result of the domineering posture of the military in the country's political arena. It is a disturbing reality to note that out of its 37 years (1997) of existence as an independent and sovereign nation-state, the military has ruled the country for 27 years. Given the command structure of the military, it is scarcely surprising that the trend of Nigeria's federalism is more towards centralization than decentralization. R.A. Akindele observes that the bane of federalism in Nigeria is that it has progressively become excessively centralized¹⁴. This centralization has been accentuated and expedited more by the Armed Forces than by other factors combined. He argues that:

*what we need today is non-centralized federal system in which the state government are politically virile, legislatively strong, financially resilient, and indeed, constitute self-confident and self assertive centres of respect by, and political loyalty from, the citizens they serve and over whom they exercise authority.*¹⁵

It is widely felt by Nigerians that the concentration of power at the centre of the federal arrangement is the bane of Nigeria's federalism. When too much power is concentrated at the centre with consequent concentration of resources, the competition for the control of the centre is usually very fierce and rough. It is in this sense that Akindele has expressed overwhelming preference for a decentralized federal system so that lower tiers of government could exercise substantial power to enable them affect meaningfully the socio-economic and political lives of their citizenry.

Indeed, the 1967 state creation exercise which was carried out by Gowon was widely thought of as a means of underplaying the secessionist bid of the eastern region by balkanizing it into so many states. The 12 states structure which was later increased to 19 by General Murtala Mohammed, later to 21 and 30 by General Ibrahim Babangida and now 36 under General Sani Abacha, has catalysed the centralization and concentration of power at the centre. This tendency has serious

implication for state and local governments autonomy. Olukoshi and Osita underscore the point that:

the state governments that replaced the regional structures on the basis of which Nigeria was ushered into independence are a miserable shadow of their predecessors, enjoying no effective autonomy and being almost all totally dependent on federal budgetary handouts for their survival.¹⁶

This disaggregative model of Nigerian federalism has threatened the viability and efficacy of lower tiers of governments in terms of their responsive and distributive capabilities.

c) **Federalism and Resource Allocation in Nigeria:**

Still very significant and salient in considering the relationship between federalism and national security in Nigeria, is the resource allocation among the various constituent units of the federation. Efforts to arrive at a national consensus on revenue sharing formula in Nigeria have hardly yielded any acceptable outcome. Intense acrimony and discontent over the pattern of resource allocation still persist. While those areas with considerable revenue earning resources espouse the principle of derivation in determining a sharing formula, those who are less endowed canvass alternative principle that would favour them. Such not-well-endowed states have argued for allocation based on population, balanced development and responsibilities of state as crucial considerations for evolving a workable sharing formula in Nigeria. In spite of the series of commissions set up to workout an acceptable revenue sharing formula for the federation, widespread consensus on the prescriptions of any of these is still elusive. For instance, while the Hicks-Phillipson commission of 1950 laid emphasis on need and national interest, the Chicks commission of 1954 prescribed the principle of derivation and yet, the Raisman's commission took into consideration, population, balanced development and basic responsibilities of the regions as determining factors in working out an acceptable revenue sharing formula.¹⁷

Recent dimension of hostility and acrimony that greeted the issue of resource allocation such as the one of the Ogoni people in Rivers state

has sensitized the national leaders to the urgent task of redressing the neglect some minorities have suffered in Nigeria. The formation of movement for the survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP) shows clearly the seriousness and the sustained commitment of the people to fight and extricate themselves from the social disabilities imposed on them by the system. The resort to mass killings of prominent Ogoni sons perceived as agents or collaborators in the agony of Ogoni people as a way of attracting governmental attention is a potent threat to national security because as Barry Buzan observes, any social system that exposes a majority to agonizing hardship, monumental social injustice, severe neglect and insensitivity etc. must necessarily be an embattled one due to the irrepressible desire of the people to pull themselves out of such socially imposed disabilities.¹⁸ It is in this very unfortunate situation that Nigeria has found itself, as people rise up in protest against one perceived neglect or the other. Some of these prominent ethnic associations that have emerged to agitate for fairness and equality in resources allocation include: Middle Belt Forum, the Southern Minorities forum, Movement for Reparation to Oloibiri, the Ijaw Ethnic National Rights Protection Organisation, the Committee of Oil Producing Areas and the Nigerian Chapter of the Ethnic Minority Rights Organisation of Africa.¹⁹ When governmental legitimacy is increasingly questioned on account of neglect and insensitivity to the legitimate demands of the people, there will be disharmony of interest between the government and the people.

While the Ogoni response gives the ethnic dimension to the resentment over the allocation of resources, there have been other reactions by way of strikes and even violent protests in the past. The persistent economic crisis which has afflicted Nigeria for over a decade now has put severe pressure on ordinary Nigerians. In addition to massive concentration of wealth in the hands of a few Nigerians largely through corruption and other illegal means, the standard of living of most Nigerians has fallen drastically. The Structural Adjustment Programme compounded the problem by inducing the economic collapse of the country. As a result, resources have become less and less available to states and local governments thereby limiting their ability to alleviate the hardship of their people. In the event not only have funds become scarce, those whose task it is to manage them have ended up looting it and neglecting the basic needs of the people. The result has been dramatic increase in violent crimes, "white collar" crime including violent crimes

by law enforcement agencies. labour unrest and violent demonstrations either against price increase such as during the Structural Adjustment programme riots of 1989,. In this struggle to survive, Nigerians seem to have abandoned any notion of patriotism and other virtues which make a country great. This, no doubt, has negative implication for national security as the people are bound to feel alienated and brutalized by the state. Not only are people withdrawing from the state in order to escape its strong hands, they sometimes even attack it in various ways let alone defend it. Claude Ake corroborates this point when he argues that:

the state has not become a reassuring presence but remains a formidable threat to everybody except the few who control it. It is largely regarded as a hostile force to be evaded, cheated, defeated and appropriated as circumstances permit.²⁰

The state of the Nigerian federation today threatens its security more than ever before.

Another dimension has been the violent reaction by communities to what they see as long history of domination by others. The perception of being under some form of internal colonialism without redress from the state has led to violent conflicts such as in Tafawa Balewa in Bauchi State in 1991, and many communities still living under this form of political and administrative arrangement without their demand for redress being met for decades. It is clear that if these communities are not given justice, Nigeria's national security will remain under serious threat. For such communities, they will continue to feel dissatisfied with the federal arrangement unless it gives them some form of local autonomy. National security will remain threatened in this kind of situation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have attempted in this paper to underscore the relationship between federalism and national security in Nigeria. A federal arrangement is adopted as an appropriate supportive framework for the accommodation of diverse cultural collectivities so as to ensure a balanced and stable system. However, the Nigerian experience of federal system appears to negate this very widely shared value. The maladministration of the federation in Nigeria as a result of the overbearing presence of the military in the country's political arena has become a source of potent

threat to national peace and stability. The incidences of coups and countercoups, group protest against uneven resource distribution, centralization of power etc. are obvious indicators of a maladministered federal arrangement.

The recent call by some aggrieved ethnic groups for the splitting of the federation has cast considerable doubt upon the efficacy of federalism to address the peculiar problems of the Nigerian State. Fear is widely expressed that Nigeria's internal crisis arising partly from a distorted federal arrangement, might likely plunge the country into tragic violence like the former Yugoslavia. This apprehension is valid in the sense that presently, there is strong internal disunity in the country and lack of trust and mutual confidence has heightened the traditional suspicion that has been an enduring hallmark of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria since the colonial period.

By and large, the dominance of the military in the administration of federalism in Nigeria has deeply distorted and perverted the practice of balanced federal system and this has in no small measure threatened national stability and unity. Federalism in Nigeria can only promote the value of national security when the different federating units are made to have a psychological feeling of belonging and shared identity by strict observance of values of equity, fairness, justice, mutual respect for one another, tolerance, etc. as instrument for the building of a virile and enduring federal arrangement. Most importantly, the military factor must be addressed to enable federal system blossom fully in Nigeria. It is only under a democratic dispensation that dialogue which is the most effective instrument of effecting mutual partisan adjustment to accommodate new realities in the administration of federalism that Nigeria can have not only a development oriented federal arrangement but to a significant extent, a well secured polity against both external and internal aggression.

It is worth mentioning here that the issue of reforming the Nigerian Federation has finally received some attention as a result of the fall-out from the annulment of the June 12 presidential election in 1993. Thus, sentiments such as marginalisation from power and national affairs began to be voiced by Nigerians from the South. The National Constitutional Conference of 1994/95 became the battle ground where Nigerians fought over such demands as the modification of the federal arrangement, power sharing including rotational Presidency and the division of that country into zones, devolution of power from the centre

to the states, the sharing of major offices between the various zones, and the allocation of resources based on derivation. After heated debates, some of these demands found their way into the 1995 draft constitution. This was clear demonstration of dissatisfaction with the way the federation has been run all this while, and the fact that its survival was in danger unless modifications such as above are undertaken.

It would appear that the government of General Sani Abacha had also come to the same conclusion when, during his broadcast to the Nation on 1st October 1995, the late Head of State announced among other things, the adoption of the rotation principle with respect to the highest office for a period of 30 years. The country was zoned into six, viz: North-East, North-West, Middle Belt, South-West, South-East, and Southern minorities. These were to rotate among them the offices of the President, Vice-President, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Senate president and Speaker of the House of Representatives. State from which mineral resource are being exploited are to be allocated 13 percent of the revenue based on derivation. Devolution of power from the centre to state was allowed in areas such as agriculture, health, and higher education to lessen the intense competition for power at the centre. However, the taste of the pudding is in the eating, and only time will tell whether this helps Nigeria.

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