

Upgrading the Belgian Contribution to NATO's Collective Defence

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Once again, collective defence constitutes the focal point of European security. This Egmont Policy Brief reviews the evolution of NATO's deterrence and defence posture, analyses the Belgian contribution to the Article 5 mission, and dissects the key issues pertaining to the future evolution thereof. These include: (1) coming to terms with the return of nuclear deterrence, (2) enabling NATO's conventional posture as a transit nation, (3) growing Belgian airpower, (4) focussing the forward engagement of Belgian land forces in eastern Europe, and (5) tailoring all supporting efforts accordingly. Additional government decisions are urgently needed, because in collective defence, it is the adversary that sets the timeline.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian war against Ukraine has dramatically highlighted the need for European states to be able to defend themselves against territorial aggression. Only days after the conflict escalated in February 2022, NATO Heads of State and Government activated the existing collective defence plans, and deployed additional forces eastwards to ensure Alliance territory would remain secure.¹ At the Madrid Summit a few months later, they set a new baseline for NATO's deterrence and defence posture with a view to defending "every inch of Allied territory at all times".² The reinforcement of NATO's deterrence and defence will therefore feature prominently on the Vilnius Summit agenda. For the first time in decades, collective defence has become truly operational again, with allied forces being readied to 'fight tonight' if needed.

Ever since the Alliance was established, its capacity to resist armed attack has been based on the combination of self-help and mutual aid.³ This principle provides each Allied nation with a unique role to play in the common strategic plan. As defence plans evolve over time, in keeping with the nature and urgency of the threat, the contribution of every ally to the collective defence system has historically evolved accordingly. Today, NATO planners are producing a new family of strategic and regional defence plans. New questions are emerging, such as whether the mix between nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities is indeed appropriate when taking Russia's nuclear threats into account.⁴ All allied nations have therefore some homework to do in terms of reconceptualising their part in the common defence. In doing so, they must focus not just on the defence of their national territory, but also on the assistance they can bring to their allies in times of need.⁵

This Egmont Policy Brief focuses on the Belgian contribution to the system of collective defence. The first section reviews the architecture of the collective defence posture that was built incrementally from 2014 onwards. Today, this defence features a dynamic interplay between the nuclear deterrence baseline, the conventional force posture, and the continued provision of military assistance to Ukraine. The second section analyses the Belgian track record in terms of shaping and resourcing this collective defence effort, in keeping with longstanding areas of expertise and investment choices. Despite substantial reinvestment, the gap between the Belgian contribution and the Article 5-based requirements is significant and continues to widen. The third and final section discusses the key issues Belgian governments will face in addressing

the needs of collective defence, and suggests new ways of doing so. Most importantly, this implies coming to terms with extended deterrence requirements, reinforcing Belgium's position as an enabler of alliance logistics, and resizing Belgian airpower in terms of current and future requirements.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF NATO'S NEW COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Most European states conceive their defence effort collectively through the framework of the NATO alliance. Whilst the organisation thereof during the Cold War period is well known, this mission largely atrophied from the 1990s onwards.⁶ Yet from 2014 onwards, a new concept for the deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area gradually emerged. This enabled NATO to adapt its posture very swiftly in the course of 2022. The ongoing refinement of this posture now provides the framework in which all different national defence plans find their common home.

When Russian aggression against Ukraine started in the spring of 2014, NATO allies did not have a meaningful collective defence system in place. The 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review considered the threat of conventional attack to be "low", and the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated as "extremely remote".⁷ As a result, conventional forces were oriented primarily towards crisis response missions, which meant they needed to be only lightly armed and deployable over long distances. Nuclear forces were kept at the significantly reduced level decided upon in the 1991 Strategic Concept. The logical consequence was that the Alliance in 2014 found itself to be lacking an operational system of collective defence. Any hypothetical Article 5 scenario would have brought about a stark choice between a sluggish conventional response to free occupied territories, or a very steep escalation to the nuclear level.

From the 2014 Wales Summit onwards, the Alliance embarked upon a process of far-reaching adaptation. NATO leaders unambiguously stated that the "greatest

responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territories and our populations against attack", thereby reprioritising the core tasks of the alliance.⁸ To that purpose a variety of adaptation measures were undertaken, such as the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. A top-level decision was reached to reverse the trend of declining defence budgets. The 2016 Warsaw Summit reaffirmed and accelerated this adaptation process.⁹ Most notably, the Heads of State and Government agreed that "deterrence and defence are at the heart of the Alliance's mission". To deliver upon this aim, they decided to establish four battalion-sized enhanced forward presence battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, "underpinned by a viable reinforcement strategy". They also put significantly more emphasis on the contribution of nuclear deterrence to the overall defence. In effect, NATO threatened to impose an unacceptable cost on any aggressor if the fundamental security of any ally were to be threatened.

NATO's new strategy to deter and defend against any attack received additional political guidance from every ensuing summit meeting and got developed into granular military detail.¹⁰ The 2018 Brussels Summit launched the so-called 4 x 30 Readiness Initiative, promising to keep 30 major naval combatants, 30 manoeuvre battalions and 30 air squadrons respectively ready at 30 days' notice. This would enable rapid reinforcement of the forward presence in times of crisis. The 2021 Brussels Summit highlighted the need to enhance societal resilience. It also featured the first mentioning of the systemic challenge posed by China's behaviour, highlighting the rapid expansion of the PRC's nuclear arsenal. Based on this summit-level guidance, NATO military authorities developed a new Military Strategy, the new Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), and a new Warfighting Capstone Concept.

The DDA Concept that NATO Defence Ministers approved in June 2020 set the stage for a full overhaul of strategic- and operational-level NATO defence plans.¹¹ The SACEUR Area of Responsibility-wide Strategic Plan provides the capstone in this regard.¹² Building on this foundation and

the additional 2022 Madrid Summit guidance, the NATO Command Structure developed a new set of domain-specific as well as geography-specific plans (owned by the three Joint Force Command headquarters). In the words of SACEUR General Cavoli, *“these plans together will drive force structure and readiness requirements—the first time in over 30 years that the Alliance will have an objective, plans-based guide for national defense investments.”*¹³ These Regional Plans and the associated force structure requirements constitute some of the most concrete inputs for the Vilnius Summit deliberations and beyond.

NATO military authorities have spent considerable attention to reconceptualising the pool of forces that is required for executing the deterrence and defence mission. The NATO New Force Model previewed at the Madrid Summit groups forces into three tiers of readiness, i.e., immediate response forces within 10 days, larger formations within 30 days, and strategic reserve forces that can be generated in the ensuing months. The key change concerns the abandonment of the rotational, schedule-based model designed for the crisis management era in favour of a standing pool of forces that SACEUR can flexibly draw upon. Nations should therefore not declare forces unless they are readily available. The ongoing review of the NATO Crisis and Response System will ensure the right elements are in the right place at the right moment and at the right level of readiness. Finally, it becomes possible to link up the regional plans with the new NATO force structure and with national force structures via the NATO Defence Planning Process.¹⁴ Instead of apportioning capability targets based on a Level of Ambition defined in abstract terms, NATO defence planning is now in the process of returning to Article 5-based force planning.

This short review of collective defence preparations illustrates the interlinkages between the nuclear posture of the Alliance and the pool of conventional forces. The continued provision of military assistance to Ukraine provides an external layer complementing this defence effort. In effect, these constitute the solid foundation, the strong walls, and the protective roof over the collective

defence of the European theatre. NATO's nuclear capability fundamentally serves to nullify Russian nuclear coercion and deter aggression. Conventional forces allow the Alliance to respond credibly and decisively to all scenarios that would not warrant a nuclear response, and as such keep the risk of uncontrolled escalation as limited as possible. The defensive war that Ukrainian forces are fighting with external support has inadvertently started to serve as an outer perimeter defence of the Alliance. If Russia fails in imposing its will on Ukraine, it cannot but doubt whether aggression against a NATO ally can succeed. In turn, every Ukrainian success on the battlefield provides NATO with valuable time to pursue its own defensive build-up.

THE BELGIAN TRACK RECORD UNDERWRITING COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

The return of collective defence has not left Belgian Defence unaffected. Successive reform plans have highlighted the importance of this core task. The STAR-plan adopted by the Belgian Government in June 2022 states unambiguously that *“Belgium's vital security interests are anchored within, and therefore fundamentally dependent on, the system of collective defence. Collective defence is more demanding than collective security and therefore has to be prioritised in terms of equipment, manpower, doctrine, planning, training, readiness and stockpiles.”*¹⁵ This section analyses the contribution that Belgium has made to collective defence over the past years, cutting across the categories of nuclear and conventional deterrence and defence, as well as highlighting the ongoing military support to Ukraine.

First and foremost, Belgium has taken on a key role in NATO's nuclear deterrence from 1957 onwards. For decades, it has combined a strong diplomatic commitment to arms control with the contribution of military personnel, infrastructure, and dual-capable weapon systems to the nuclear deterrence mission.¹⁶ In line with the posture decisions taken in the 1991 NATO Strategic Concept, this nuclear role was reduced to the minimum level, based only on dual-capable aircraft. As conventional deterrence largely disappeared during

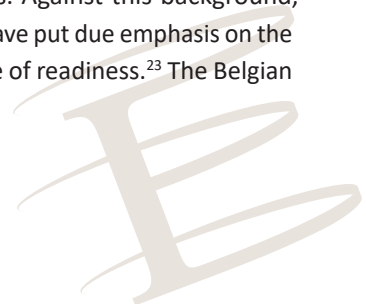
the post-Cold War era, the Belgian contribution to NATO's deterrence was in 2014 essentially limited to nuclear deterrence alone. This reflects the foundational nature of nuclear deterrence as well as the fact that this nuclear contribution remains the most strategically significant role Belgium plays in NATO's overall defence. As NATO's nuclear language evolved from 2016 onwards, Belgium and other allies fielding dual-capable aircraft co-shaped the decision-making on nuclear policy and started signalling the importance thereof again. The communication relating to NATO's annual nuclear deterrence exercise *Steadfast Noon* is a case in point.¹⁷

The second component of the Belgian contribution to collective defence concerns the protection of the national territory. During the post-Cold War period, the relative absence of military threat implied that this function was primarily approached from a law enforcement perspective. Yet this nonetheless necessitated the use of military assets for air policing and maritime security purposes. From 2017 onwards, air policing started to be organised on a rotational basis in which the Belgian and Royal Dutch Air Forces each assure the armed Quick Reaction Alert capability for the Benelux airspace in alternation. Following the Brussels terrorist attacks in 2015-2016, the Belgian government also decided to deploy a significant amount of land forces in support of internal security forces (hence making them unavailable for other assignments). Similarly, the growing threat of cyber-attacks against Belgian government networks prompted the development of a cyber command and associated cyber forces, with initial operating capability declared in 2022.¹⁸ While these missions are not uniquely related to the threat of Russian aggression, the associated forces are the first responders for defending the Belgian homeland and critical infrastructure against bombardment or sabotage. In the light of the security environment that has come into being since 2022, missions like air defence and critical infrastructure protection are looming ever more prominently in the self-help category of collective defence.

The third and most visible Belgian contribution to collective defence concerns the deployment of forces

to the most vulnerable allies in eastern Europe. In 2004, Belgium was the first nation to take on NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission, which it has continued to rotationally engage in ever since. Following the 2014 Wales Summit, this got complemented by land exercises such as *Baltic Piranha*. From the 2016 Warsaw Summit onwards, the Belgian government - operating with strong parliamentary support - started contributing to NATO's *enhanced Force Presence*, deploying land forces to the German-led battlegroup in Lithuania.¹⁹ The activation of NATO's defence plans in February 2022 resulted in the deployment of Belgian forces to what became the French-led collective defence battlegroup in Romania.²⁰ These forward deployments constitute different components of NATO conventional deterrence posture. They have rapidly become the focal point of Belgium's operational posture and a key component of intra-European solidarity.²¹ In the words of King Philip during a state visit to Vilnius in November 2022: *"the presence of our forces in Lithuania has become self-evident, the necessity thereof understood and supported by every Belgian"*.²²

Less visible, but no less important, is the contribution of Belgian forces to resourcing the NATO force structure. This fourth 'readiness contribution' runs largely in parallel to the third one, in the sense that operational deployments are only possible if adequate forces have been trained and exercised. The Belgian contribution to NATO's New Force Model and the translation of capability targets apportioned to Belgium into the necessary acquisition, recruitment and training efforts on the national level are different manifestations thereof. Capability development always underlies engagement in multinational formations. Far from being a theoretical exercise, the contribution of any ally to the NATO Force Model - commensurate with the NATO defence planning targets - determines the volume of reinforcements that is available at short notice for responding to any incident or crisis. As the Warsaw Summit already previewed, the enhanced forward presence battlegroups derive their deterrence value largely from the tripwire function they served in terms of activating reinforcements. Against this background, Belgian military authorities have put due emphasis on the need to (re)develop a culture of readiness.²³ The Belgian



staff contribution to the NATO Command Structure, the financial contribution to NATO common funding, and the role Belgium plays as host nation for NATO HQ and SHAPE are other key national ingredients for enabling NATO's readiness.

Finally, the provision of military assistance to Ukraine can be seen as an indirect contribution to collective defence. As the ongoing war forces the Russian military to concentrate and consume their resources while holding on to the occupied territories, the relative success of Ukraine's armed forces in defending their homeland is inversely correlated with the Russian threat to NATO territory. The military assistance to Ukraine helps inflicting a high level of combat attrition on Russian land forces and munition stockpiles. This is likely to constrain Russia's ability to wage offensive conventional operations for at least some years into the future. Whilst Belgian aid to Ukraine is only modest in size - accounting for some 0.33% of GDP to date - it is nonetheless significant in certain respects.²⁴ Belgian military assistance has included important amounts of fuel and small calibre munitions, anti-tank and air defence missiles, machine guns and military vehicles. Apart from various sorts of humanitarian and economic aid, Belgium is also playing critical niche roles in terms of blocking Russian financial assets, safeguarding the Ukrainian diplomatic archives, and preparing for the post-war demining effort that is yet to come.

Whilst the Belgian contribution to collective defence is multifaceted and significant in certain respects, the quantitative difference between what is already provided and what is needed to meet Article 5 requirements continues to increase. The NATO New Force Model foresees over 300,000 forces in tier 1 and tier 2, ready within a timeframe of 30 days. The Belgian proportional share thereof would suggest keeping some 6,000 forces permanently on standby.²⁵ Similarly, the plans-based capability targets that the next NATO Defence Planning Process cycle will apportion to Belgium will become more demanding in the future. In contrast, Belgium already fell short of existing targets, most notably the development of an additional medium infantry brigade

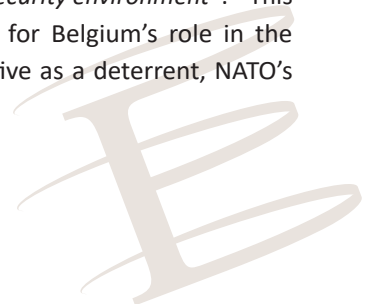
and the fielding of an adequate number of next-generation combat aircraft. Some of the associated investment requirements have already been taken up in the new military programming law, such as counter-drone, maritime minelaying, and ground-based air defence capabilities. Yet this is far from being the case across the board. Moreover, challenges pertaining to recruitment, retention and attrition of personnel risk are constraining the necessary growth of combat and combat support capabilities in the short- to medium-term. The next section therefore focuses on the key issues policymakers will confront in recalibrating the Belgian position in the collective defence debate.

KEY ISSUES FOR BELGIUM

At the Vilnius summit, NATO Heads of State and Government will take stock of what the new baseline for NATO's deterrence and defence posture implies. This relates to the new regional plans, the military capabilities these plans require, and the position that Ukraine holds in the Euro-Atlantic collective defence. Most fundamentally, this also requires appreciating the subtle but important difference between the capabilities needed for *deterrence* - that is to say, for discouraging Russia to engage NATO in a military conflict - and the additional capabilities needed for *defence* in case deterrence fails. Nations have every incentive for ensuring that deterrence requirements are met, precisely because the cost of defence increases exponentially if deterrence were to fail. As far as the Belgian contribution to the common defence is concerned, the following issues stand out.

1. Coming to terms with the return of nuclear deterrence

The logic of deterrence has become central to NATO's strategy once more. Speaking after recent Nuclear Planning Group consultations, Secretary General Stoltenberg explained that NATO will "*adapt (its) nuclear deterrence to the changing security environment*".²⁶ This has important implications for Belgium's role in the alliance. Firstly, to be effective as a deterrent, NATO's



nuclear capability based on dual capable aircraft must be considered as an operational instrument again, i.e., one that is fully trained and ready, one that can be used for signalling purposes, and one that can execute the nuclear strike mission when required. Secondly, Belgian leaders need to recognise that NATO enlargement has endowed them with additional nuclear responsibilities. They are no longer mere recipients, but also co-providers of extended deterrence. Simply put, the Belgian contribution to NATO's nuclear deterrence still protects the Belgian national territory, yet it has also become a capability on which other allies in Central and Eastern Europe depend. Finally, NATO's present nuclear posture is inadequate for meeting the new security environment created by Russia's attempted nuclear coercion. A conventionally weakened Russia may increasingly come to rely on its formidable nuclear arsenal as its remaining competitive advantage - especially in terms of theatre-level strike systems. A more robust, survivable, and diversified NATO posture is needed to ensure that any nuclear escalation can be suitably deterred.

2. Meeting the emerging requirements for enabling NATO's conventional posture

NATO's conventional force posture as outlined in the regional plans requires a significant footprint in terms of forward forces for deterrence as well as the arrival of much larger formations in case deterrence transitions into defence. For instance, the regional plan for the centre region alone would require deploying multiple army divisions. To sustain these forces would require thousands of containers and thousands of tonnes of fuel per day. This posture depends on high-volume logistical supply lines running back to the major North Sea ports - including Antwerp and Zeebrugge - and various enabling capabilities. The Belgian ports, the petrochemical cluster and railway infrastructure play a key role in this respect. All-domain capabilities for enabling the fast transit and adequate protection of critical infrastructure against bombardment and sabotage actions will feature prominently in the targets apportioned to Belgium for the next NATO defence planning cycle. Whilst providing for logistical

support and coastal security is no front-line capability, it is critically important to a robust NATO posture. Note that the logistical supply lines from Antwerp and Zeebrugge constitute end points of west to east continental transit, thus mainly feeding the effort in the centre region commanded by Joint Forces Command (JFC) Brunssum and supported by the Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm.

3. Re-dimensioning Belgian airpower

Implementing 2016 Strategic Vision, the Belgian government decided to acquire 34 F-35 multirole fighter jets to replace the ageing fleet of 54 F-16s. At that point in time, the next generation fleet was sized in accordance with a budgetary defence effort foreseen to increase to 1.3% of GDP. Already then, this fell short of the NATO air combat capability target for Belgium. Yet for several reasons, Belgian airpower will need to grow significantly in size in the years ahead. Firstly, more aircraft will be required to execute the different missions in the new security environment. Air defence is more demanding than air policing, and readiness requirements for all missions are increasing. Secondly, all European air forces need to take a close look at the relative vulnerability of their bases, the relative priority accorded to training for high-intensity missions, and the available munition stocks for the suppression and destruction of enemy air defences. If NATO wants to be able to defend itself against Russian aggression more effectively than Ukrainian forces - i.e., from a position of air superiority - European air forces urgently need to regenerate warfighting credibility, including by acquiring significant numbers of deep strike munitions.²⁷ Thirdly and critically, airpower constitutes the only combat capability that Belgium can grow substantially and relatively quickly in the light of the recruitment challenges that Belgian Defence faces. Simply put, the personnel build-up required for fielding an additional brigade or frigate - both important objectives in their own right - will take much longer to accomplish and result in less strategic effect than meeting Belgium's air combat requirements in full. In the run-up to the Madrid Summit, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo promised that Belgium would meet the NATO 2% target

by 2034. A follow-on purchase of F-35s and associated manned-unmanned teaming platforms, combined with an expansion of air force personnel and infrastructure constitutes the main pathway to delivering on this promise. Parallel R&D efforts in sixth-generation combat aviation technologies do not help meeting air force requirements for several decades to come and should therefore not be misconstrued as a false alternative to a larger F-35 fleet.

4. Determining the geographical focus for Belgian forward land forces

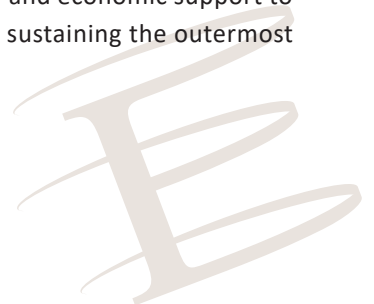
The key choice confronting Belgian defence planners concerns the geographic focus for engaging Belgian land forces along the eastern front. At present, Belgian land forces are engaged in Lithuania, part of the centre region commanded by JFC Brunssum, as well as in Romania, part of the south-eastern region commanded by JFC Naples. Over the medium term, this double focus will become unsustainable. Such forward presence will require prepositioning equipment, munition, and fuel stocks, driving up the cost of being present in two theatres. In addition, the Belgian land component will for several years still lack the depth to generate significant reinforcements for just one theatre - let alone two.

Whilst the technical interoperability with French land forces will grow because of the new generation of land vehicles being acquired, several strategic considerations would plead in favour of prioritising the commitment to the NATO battlegroup in Lithuanian. Not only does this build on the strong diplomatic relations between the Benelux and Baltic states, but it also aligns with what is the main effort of NATO's deterrence and defence overall. In addition, a focus on the regional plan for the centre aligns with the enabling and transit capabilities mentioned above. Finally, the Belgian staff presence in Brunssum is already much larger and more nearby than the one in Naples. Should the long-term focus nonetheless be put on consolidating the Belgian footprint in Romania, this would require various adaptation measures, most notably building up staff presence in Naples and compensating the departure

from Lithuania by other means (such as increased air or naval presence and the opening of an embassy). Even with a razor-sharp focus on a single deployment area, it remains imperative to continue the growth trajectory for Belgian land forces towards a fully equipped, two combined arms brigade structure in the medium term and three brigades in the long-term. Only this will allow Belgium to sustain brigade-level readiness via rotation.

5. Tailoring all supporting efforts

Whilst the four issues identified above constitute clear priorities, there are a whole range of secondary issues clamouring for attention. The fifth work strand therefore concerns the tailoring of all other efforts accordingly. As the Belgian Navy will see the delivery of its new ships in the coming years, the worldwide reach thereof deserves to be emphasised (as land forces will acquire more of a region-specific role). Once the personnel structure allows for manning a larger number of ships, the acquisition of at least one additional frigate should be considered. The Special Operations Regiment will constitute a versatile instrument for immediate response to various contingencies and for nurturing societal resilience in cooperation with military intelligence. As the command architecture of NATO's special operations forces will need to be updated in terms of the regional plans, the Belgian contribution will need to adapt accordingly. Yet the most important supporting effort probably concerns the Belgian Defence staff contribution to the NATO Command Structure and common funding arrangements. Through its staff presence in various NATO headquarters, Belgian officers will be in the loop the earliest in time and in the greatest detail. This is a qualitative advantage not to be missed, especially if it can be leveraged by a well-designed coordination effort at the national level. Similarly, the Belgian contribution to common funding is set to be an important multiplier of effects, not the least because the modernisation of NATO infrastructure in Mons is underway. Finally, the continuation of military and economic support to Ukraine remains critical for sustaining the outermost line of defence.



CONCLUSION

Looking ahead, the Belgian contribution to collective defence will become the critical discussion informing future policy decisions relating to the Belgian armed forces. At the Vilnius Summit, NATO leaders are set to take stock of the progress that was made in reinvigorating deterrence and defence. When they meet again in Washington in 2024, the focus will increasingly shift towards the question to what extent allies are taking up their own role and fair share in the common defence. Belgian defence planners will therefore need to address the key issues identified above and put forward new proposals for government decisions. Given the long time-delays between political agreements and the delivery or reorientation of fully trained capabilities, there is no time to lose. As explained by Admiral Bauer, Chairman of the Military Committee, *“the fundamental difference between crisis management and collective defence is that it is not we, but our adversary who determines the timeline”*.²⁸ If war comes, we will either be capable to defend ourselves and our allies, or not.

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