

## CHINA PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC) AND PROSPECTS OF TOURISM IN GILGIT-BALTISTAN, PAKISTAN

<sup>1</sup>Rehmat Karim, <sup>2</sup>Faqeer Muhammad, <sup>3</sup>Naveed Razzaq

<sup>1</sup>Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Karakoram International University, Hunza Campus, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Economics, Karakoram International University, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup>School of Economics and Management, School of Foreign Languages, Xinyu University, Jiangxi, China.

[rehmat@kiu.edu.pk](mailto:rehmat@kiu.edu.pk)

Corresponding Author: \*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the prospects of Chinese tourism in the larger framework of the CPEC and other Chinese development projects in Pakistan, with particular emphasis on Gilgit-Baltistan. CPEC fosters cultural exchange by attracting tourists interested in Pakistan's various traditions while preserving cultural heritage sites. This initiative stimulates eco-tourism by featuring Pakistan's picturesque landscape and providing diverse adventures. Additionally, CPEC initiatives offer jobs in different sectors, including the tourism industry, improving local economic development. Although these benefits are promising, the CPEC faces obstacles such as the necessity for sustainable growth and the protection of cultural heritage. Mitigating these issues requires attention to responsible tourism practices and effective community engagement in decision-making. Apart from tourism, the CPEC facilitates connectivity to historical and religious landmarks. By enhancing trade and regional linkages, the CPEC aims to stimulate economic growth, develop energy security, and encourage technology transfer, ultimately supporting industrial advancement in Pakistan. In summary, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) owns the potential to transform Pakistan's tourism industry. By flourishing infrastructure, cultural exchange, and innovative tourism products, the CPEC can portray Pakistan as a potential tourist destination. The successful execution of CPEC will not only leverage the economies of China and Pakistan, but it will also support the cultural and social progress of both countries.

### INTRODUCTION

To enrich interregional connectivity among different nations, the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) is a global infrastructural development strategy that aims to enhance trade alongside social and cultural relations, in addition to developing infrastructure. It aims to boost economic activities and trade, paving the way to upgrade the standards of living for billions of people worldwide. This all-important project regarding the BRI is known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Its focus is on the development of infrastructure, energy, and transportation networks, with the main

objective of improving economic cooperation between China and Pakistan.

Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China were established in 1951, and since then, both countries have been enhancing bilateral cooperation in almost all walks of life. The 21st century witnessed China emerging as a major global economic protagonist, which has massively shifted postures and liaisons across East, Central, and South Asia, enabling China to take centre stage in various issues concerning nations across the world. China's economic growth and active diplomacy have positioned it as a trusted friend and neighbor in Pakistan, and it is widely welcomed as a catalyst for

economic growth in many parts of the world, including Pakistan. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a massive groundwork development project intended to connect China and Pakistan through a network of roads, railways, pipelines, and other infrastructure projects (Zuhaib et al. 2025). One of the lesser known but equally important aspects of the CPEC is its potential to revolutionize the tourism industry in Pakistan.

At the dawn of this century, the world is swiftly moving towards globalization. It's common and every adult has understanding that tourism is a source of foreign exchange, fostering opportunities to strengthen economy in developing countries. In line with this, Agaraj and Murati in 2015 reported that tourism plays a vital role in driving the economic development of the country. "The tourism sector has consistently played a pivotal role in improving the livelihoods of countless individuals by stimulating economic growth, generating employment opportunities, alleviating poverty, and promoting both development and cultural understanding (M. Abert, 2013).

Yamei reported in Xinhua news from President Xi's speech in 2017 that "One Belt One Road (OBOR) is an initiative by China aimed at fostering inter-regional connectivity among various nations to boost trade, cultural exchanges, and infrastructure development. This initiative seeks to promote economic growth and activity, thereby offering an opportunity to improve the lives of billions of people globally. An English newspaper, Tribune, in 2018 also stated that the initiative aims to enhance the quality of tourism services, improve public information accessibility, and streamline transportation and security services for the benefit of the public. It will also foster stronger social and economic development collaborations between Pakistan and China. Furthermore, Baig and Zehra (2020) upheld the role of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in good governance in promoting tourism in GB, Pakistan (Muhammad et al. 2023). The growing significance of effective governance and convenient access to tourist destinations has heightened its impact on traveler's choices. Their research indicates that governance plays a crucial, substantial, direct, and indirect role in the tourism sector. Additionally, their study revealed that the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC) has a notable influence on tourism in GB, Pakistan.

Hence, the speed, size, and magnitude of China's economic boom and its diplomatic overtures are destined to reshape its neighbours. China-Pakistan relations can vastly assist Pakistan's economic growth, stability, and development through common interests and shared concerns. They were introduced to maintain friendly relations between the two countries and realise their common values in addressing global challenges. China has long wanted to heat up its plea with Pakistan, as evidenced by flagship projects like the KKH. This 700-kilometer highway from Islamabad to Kashgar, winding through the rugged mountains of Gilgit-Baltistan, is a key driver of economic development in the region.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a massive development and infrastructure project that connects Gwadar Port in southwestern Pakistan to China's northwestern region of Xinjiang via planned railways, highways, pipelines, and other developments. Despite this, the CPEC mainly aims to improve trade and transportation links, but this comes with huge tourism opportunities on both sides. This chapter discusses the influence of the CPEC on tourism development, with a critical lens toward utilising this mega-project to advance tourism goals.

Geographically, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a gateway that connects China's northwest Xinjiang region with Pakistan's southwestern Gwadar Port. While the focus of the CPEC is mainly on trade and infrastructure development, it has enormous potential as a gateway for Chinese tourists seeking to discover Pakistan's cultural, historic, and natural treasures.

Cultural exchange between China and Pakistan will be promoted, which also takes up the share of cultural tourism that is socio-economic development (Fayyaz & Muqadas 2025). Both nations will reap the benefits of this, with tourists soaking in the unique cultures that each country offers. It will open new frontiers of adventure tourism in Pakistan, such as trekking, hiking, and mountaineering. This will appeal to tourists seeking outdoor and adventure opportunities. It will also enhance the healthcare system of Pakistan and make it a more preferable place for medical tourism. This

will generate revenue for the tourism industry while enhancing healthcare quality in Pakistan. In particular, CPEC will make new tourist destinations accessible in Pakistan's northwestern regions, such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan Province. This opens new avenues for building and diversifying tourism. China and Pakistan can also jointly market tourism in both countries. It will consolidate the touristic business to attract more tourists and increase revenue for the tourism sector. Therefore, a huge step in the CPEC can be the issuance of visas so that tourists from each country visit each other without difficulty. Thus, more people will come to Pakistan, which will help the tourism industry and culture exchange.

In summary, the (CPEC) has the potential to significantly transform 's tourism industry. By improving infrastructure, promoting cultural exchange, and creating new tourism products, the CPEC can help Pakistan become a major tourist destination (Zuhaib et al. 2025). The successful implementation of the CPEC will not only benefit the economies of China and Pakistan but also contribute to the cultural and social development of both countries.

### 1.2 Geographical Context and Tourism

Gilgit-Baltistan shares borders with Afghanistan to the north, China to the northeast, the Pakistani-administered state of Azad Jammu and Kashmir to the south, and the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir to the southeast (PakVisit, n.d.). Covering a territory of 72,496 km<sup>2</sup>, Gilgit-Baltistan has an estimated population of 1.8 million (UNPO, 2011). While experiencing significant population growth, the region also witnesses substantial outmigration, driven by the desire to increase household incomes and diversify income sources (Kreutzmann, 2007). The Karakoram range stretches 350 km parallel to the Himalayas, extending from the Siachen glacier in the east along the Pakistan-China border to the Ishkoman River, which separates the Karakoram range from the Hindu Kush in the west (Ives, 2004). The development of tourism in the Karakoram region has been influenced by its geographical conditions, particularly the presence of tall mountains, including four peaks over 8000 meters: K2 (8611m), Gasherbrum I (8063m), Broad Peak (8047m), and Gasherbrum II (8035m). The desire to conquer

these peaks in the mid-20th century played a significant role in the region's initial tourism development, which initially focused on exploration and mountaineering expeditions, later followed by a surge in trekking, becoming one of the most popular forms of adventure tourism in the broader Himalayan region (Mrak, 2011; Karim et al., 2014). The construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) in 1978 aided in a phenomenal rise in tourists. For example, the number of tourists in the Hunza Valley was 302 in 1979, which reached up to 5361 in 1985 (Ives, 2004; Karim et al., 2014). The KKH's construction also played an important role in the life of local communities with out-migration and major social structure change (Kreutzmann, 2007; Karim et al., 2014). It is expected that this will multiply with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); therefore, not only Pakistan but also Gilgit-Baltistan will be an important beneficiary of this project. The Baltoro Glacier and Karakoram Mountains have a rich history of mountain tourism (Mrak, 2011; Karim et al., 2014). There are many high mountain peaks and very large glaciers in this area—the largest outside the polar regions—all of which can be reached primarily by foot. Askoli, a small village that has been conducting mountain research expeditions since the 19th century, acts as one of the main starting or exiting points for treks. Local men traditionally work as porters, cooks, and guides, assisting visitors in transporting equipment and food to base camps or along selected trekking routes (Mrak, 2011; Karim et al., 2014).

### 1.3 Impacts of China's rise to global dominance on GB

The erstwhile princely kingdoms of Gilgit-Baltistan had cordial trading and diplomatic relations with various Chinese dynasties ruling the contiguous areas of these principalities. The princely kingdom of Hunza was particularly close to various provincial governors of Chinese dynasties ruling the Uyghur-Xinjiang prefecture. This long-standing friendly relationship bore fruit in the modern era when the British liquidated their South Asian empire and partitioned the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan and India in 1947. The emergence of new nation-states in South Asia has also resulted in new border disputes. While Indian border disputes resulted in a military confrontation between China and India over the Aksai Chin area, Sino-Pakistan disputes

were amicably resolved despite the shadows of the Cold War, in which Pakistan firmly anchored itself in the Western capitalist camp. The border demarcation treaty between Pakistan and China, signed in 1962, was one of the most peaceful settlements between any two neighboring countries. This early goodwill between the two countries has stood the test of time and it has spilled over in the post-Cold War rise of China. Though Chinese economic clout is not close to the level of and importance of world's foremost super power the United States or even imperial Great Britain yet rapidly increasing needs of Chinese economy for different varieties of industrial inputs has fueled the global economy and expanded the network of its trading partners. This pursuit of international trade and expanding economic relations has pushed China to use all avenues for the transportation of its goods to different countries and the KKH is one of the most successful economic corridors for China to access Af-Pak and the Middle eastern countries therefore there is an enhanced interest in building, expanding and consolidating infrastructure through its Western borders. In this context GB-China border cooperation, though rooted in history and culture, has achieved new limelight (Karim et al. 2020).

#### 1.4 People to People Contact and Tourism

China's emergence as a dominant economic force in the 21st century has brought substantial changes in geopolitical alignments and partnerships across East, Central, and South Asia. China has assumed its rightful place on the global stage and is exerting its influence in various spheres of international relations. In Pakistan, China is viewed as a trusted and reliable friend and an exemplary neighbor, benefiting from its extensive influence and being widely embraced as a catalyst for economic growth in many parts of the world, including Pakistan and regions spanning Africa to East Asia. China's impressive growth, combined with assertive diplomacy, is about to make the neighbourhood a different place. Among these countries, Pakistan has much to gain from the potential economic growth, stability, and development of China. The common grievances and convergence of bilateral interests between China and Pakistan are old, while the future is also in sync as both countries share similar values in tackling global challenges. Inbound and

outbound tourism in China is booming, making it an important developing market for tourism. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 2012, China ranked third among the top ten world tourism markets, and its outbound tourism spending amounted to a substantial \$72.6 billion in 2011. According to Forbes, "China was the largest contributor to outbound tourism, with 170 million trips, bringing in 253 billion U.S. dollars for the global economy in 2019" (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

If Pakistan strategically targets just 5% of the Chinese tourists' outbound spending, it could amount to a significant revenue of \$3.63 billion USD. This revenue could serve as a groundbreaking step towards revitalizing the tourism sector in Pakistan as a whole, with a particular focus on Gilgit-Baltistan. With the modern road and rail connectivity between Pakistan and China, not only will trade and industrial activities receive a boost in the region, but tourism in the country, especially in Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the coastal areas of Makran, will also flourish (The Nation, 2013). Furthermore, the recent agreement between the two countries to establish an economic corridor connecting Kashgar, China, and Gwadar, Pakistan, presents a tremendous opportunity (Fayyaz & Muqadas, 2025). The infusion of \$46 billion in Chinese investment into Pakistan has the potential to be a game changer within the next 10-15 years. If this investment is utilized wisely, it could pave the way for Pakistan to join the ranks of the influential Asian tiger economies (Pamir Times, 2015). With enhanced incomes Chinese travelers are heading to European and North American cities to see for themselves the history and culture of these great destinations. The US business journal Forbes estimates that Chinese outbound tourism is growing by 18% without showing any signs of slowing down.

- Cultural exchanges will increase, and there will be an opportunity for GB people to discover ancient civilizations and learn from the lessons of a great emerging power.
- Chinese will have an opportunity to discover 'lived Islam' in GB.
- Chinese tourists will have an opportunity to enjoy 'adventure tourism' in GB.

Recently, the cross-border bus service between Gilgit and Kashgar resumed after a 14-year hiatus, aimed at improving connectivity between the two areas. The service was halted in 2010 following a natural disaster that led to the creation of Attabad Lake, which submerged part of the Karakoram Highway. Its reinstatement is expected to significantly strengthen ties between Pakistan and China, promoting tourism and trade, especially in the picturesque and strategically important Gilgit-Baltistan region (Daily CPEC, 2024). The resumption of the cross-border bus service between Gilgit and Kashgar is expected to have several positive effects, including improved travel connectivity between Pakistan and China. This service is expected to boost tourism and economic activity in the scenic Gilgit-Baltistan region. The free flow of goods and services can also boost trade. Well-established links may help enhance bilateral ties and foster cooperation in various sectors. Furthermore, the economic boost of tourism and trade, as well as job creation for local workers, will foster cultural integration and benefits to the local economy, ultimately paving the way for stronger ties between Pakistan and China.

#### **1.5 Chinese Development Co-operation:**

A calamity in 2010 near Attabad blocked the Karakoram Highway (KKH), cutting overland ties between Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan, causing immense human misery and disrupting Sino-Pakistan trade and infrastructure development (Ali, 2020). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one such strategic initiative launched to improve infrastructure, especially road networks and airports that provide access to far-flung areas and thus stimulate tourism (Baloch & Zhang, 2019, Karim et al. 2020).

The CPEC promotes cultural exchange by attracting tourists interested in Pakistan's diverse traditions while preserving cultural heritage sites (Hussain & Mengistu, 2021). The initiative encourages ecotourism through Pakistan's scenic landscapes and offers activities for adventure seekers (Hussain & Mengistu, 2021). CPEC projects create employment opportunities in tourism and other sectors, stimulating local economic growth (Wang, 2018, Ali, 2025).

CPEC has its share of challenges, but we cannot criticise it for the greater good that comes from this

commitment. Responsible tourism practices and community empowerment in the decision-making process are some of the strategies to counterbalance these problems (Hussain & Mengistu, 2021, Ali, 2025). Moreover, CPEC has made it easier for tourists and other people to access historical and religious sites in Pakistan, allowing Chinese businessmen to invest opportunities (Baloch & Zhang, 2019). Wang (2018) affirms that CPEC is anticipated to boost the all-round development of Pakistan through invigorating trade routes and advancing regional connectivity, thus leading to economic development, power security management, and technology transfusion, making Pakistan an industrialised nation.

#### **1.6 China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Challenges**

However, CPEC also comes with challenges and considerations regarding debt sustainability, environmental impact, local community engagement, and ensuring inclusive and equitable development (Ali, 2025, Waleed et al. 2025). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its challenges have a rich literature available. These include aspects ranging from economic implications to security concerns and political dynamics. However, this study provides an overview of the existing literature and elaboratively records some potential adjustments in the context of the CPEC. Consequently, Ali (2018) mentioned CPEC's economic and political importance to Pakistan, whether it is a game changer and challenges related to it. Moreover Zhang & Liu (2019), Mansoor & Khalid (2018), Maqsood & Tufail (2019) and Khan & Shah (2019) discussed the potential economic benefits of CPEC along with social implications for local population such as opportunities and threats. They examine the CPEC's economic and social impacts (Muhammad et al. 2023), already casting light on both its opportunities and challenges. While another prospective of CPEC projects governance picture is drawn through a case study on security threats to the CPEC projects and challenges of governance which Pakistan need to take seriously to accomplish them (Hussain and Muharrar, 2020, Alam et al., 2023). India always tried to conspiring Pakistan and opposing the China BRI-CPEC projects at different platforms for many years and attempting the launch of similar project; Shafqat

and Khan (2018) explored the geopolitical implications particularly India geopolitical concerns regarding CPEC in term of regional security dynamics. Additionally, Bokhari (2021) analysed the potential of CPEC in relation to Pakistan China relations and understanding its impact on regional balance looking at opportunities/macro benefits and challenges.

This large body of work offers a comprehensive view of the CPEC, including the multiple challenges it faces in the economic, social, political, and security domains. This study highlights several challenges in conjunction with the relevant existing literature on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

1. **Debt burden:** One of the concerns is that Pakistan will have to carry a huge debt burden due to the CPEC. Since these are large-scale projects that require a lot of investment, the cost of debt for CPEC projects concerned many locals, as they believed that Pakistan would not be able to pay it back over the years.

2. **Security:** Security is another concern for the CPEC, with some areas along the planned route facing security threats that challenge the smooth implementation of projects. The CPEC in Pakistan may be hindered by insurgent activities, political instability, and conflicts that can disrupt construction and operation.

3. **Socioeconomic Disparities:** There CPEC may deepen existing socioeconomic disparities within Pakistan. CPEC has the potential to bring transformative economic growth, but without comprehensive planning and equitable development across all regions and sectors, it could lead to the further marginalisation of specific areas.

4. **Environmental Impact:** Building dams, highways, and other infrastructure projects under CPEC might have ecological ramifications. **Data Collection and Management:** Use sufficient data collection strategies to obtain information on emissions, water use, and other relevant environmental variables, in addition to more management practices needed for tracking progress towards sustainability targets; if you are most interested in ethical mining operations varying at a small cost of variance from assessment to mitigate both critical ecosystems or ecosystems/habitats. Concurrent with this, Ghazali and Rumman (2020) also mentioned environmental dilemmas resulting

from CPEC initiatives and advocated for incorporating sustainable development mechanisms.

5. **Transparency and Governance:** [The second priority should be to ensure transparency in project implementation, procurement processes, and financial transactions.] You are taught on data until October 2023. Similarly, Pakistan will have to take security threats and governance challenges seriously to successfully implement CPEC projects (Hussain & Muharrar 2020).

6. **Local Community Engagement:** The success of CPEC projects hinges on effective local community engagement and inclusion in decision-making processes and sharing of benefits. Properly balancing property rights and community concerns is also critical for avoiding the risk of social tension and conflict. (Mansoor & Khalid, 2018; Maqsood & Tufail, 2019, Waleed et al. 2025) They also considered both the potential opportunities and positive effects on local communities regarding the CPEC, as well as any challenges that might arise.

7. **Geopolitical Implications:** CPEC operates under geopolitical interests, making the project closely monitored by regional and global powers. However, its resonance with different geopolitical interests and rivalries adds a layer of complexity that can affect the implementation and future dynamics of this project. Geographical Issues on CPEC and its Effects on Regional Security Dynamics were explored by Shafqat and Khan (2018) and Chaudhry and Ali (2020).

#### **1.7 GB for Chinese Tourists**

Owing to its natural beauty, cultural treasure and proximity to China, Gilgit-Baltistan holds great potential to become a famous tourist destination for Chinese travellers. Adding to its attractiveness are the region's strategic location and its inclusion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Occupying its place in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Gilgit-Baltistan have a huge potential to lure Chinese tourists towards the breathtaking beauty of Gilgit-Baltistan and endless cultural heritage. Many factors contributing to its alluring for the Chinese traveller. The country borders China, so very convenient for tourists. The China-Pakistan corridor, as well as the construction of the Karakoram Highway has also contact Pakistan and China transportationally (Baloch & Zhang,

2019). Moreover, in terms of scenic spot and adventure the areas are famous for its beautiful sceneries covering the Karakoram and Himalayas, Gilgit-Baltistan attracts nature lovers and adventure seekers who enjoy trekking, mountaineering, skiing and river rafting (Hussain & Mengistu, 2021). It has archaeological sites, historical forts and places of significance located around those communities that provide a glimpse to tourists about their different lifestyles (Ali, 2020). Infact, hundreds of mountaineers and climbers come here every year for expedition. Home to peaks like K2 - one of the highest mountains in the world, its rugged beauty and renowned climbing routes attract Chinese mountaineers looking for an adventure (Baloch & Zhang, 2019).

In terms of religious heritage, the area holds significant archaeological sites for Buddhists and attracts Chinese travellers seeking to trace their cultural and religious roots through centuries-old monasteries and rock carvings (Hussain & Mengistu, 2021). Additionally, it is likely that this connection will boost trade and cultural exchange between the two countries. Historically, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan was included in the Silk Road which linked China to both Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent which can lure tourists interested in ancient trade routes and cultural exchanges (Wang, 2018).

To fully tap into the potential of Chinese tourists visiting Gilgit-Baltistan, it is essential to develop appropriate infrastructure, promote tourism packages, enhance marketing efforts in China, facilitate visa procedures, provide language support, and ensure the safety and comfort of Chinese travellers. Moreover, fostering cultural understanding and providing authentic experiences contribute to a positive and memorable visit for Chinese tourists in Gilgit-Baltistan.

### Conclusion

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) serves as a strategic platform for strengthening the bilateral relationship between China and Pakistan. By utilising the CPEC as a conduit, the promotion of tourism through the development of infrastructure, enhancement of natural attractions, and facilitation of cultural exchange can significantly contribute to economic growth. Furthermore, it fosters a deeper understanding of

diverse cultures. However, to ensure the long-term benefits of the CPEC and its positive impact on the tourism sector, it is essential to implement sustainable practices through the collaboration of all stakeholders involved.

Infrastructure projects under the CPEC, such as enhanced roads, airports, and transport networks, help facilitate tourism development. It makes it easier to reach different tourist destinations in Pakistan, from cultural heritage sites and natural beauty spots to those of adventure tourism. The Pakistan Government is well aware of the importance of tourism as a great source of income and job creation. This includes efforts such as developing tourist-friendly policies, improving security, and investing in building new resorts and destinations. Additionally, CPEC has created opportunities for investment in the hotel and hospitality industry, resulting in the establishment of new hotels and resorts throughout Pakistan. This not only enhances the accommodation that tourists from other nations and locals can enjoy but also promotes tourism development.

While CPEC promotes cultural exchange and cooperation between China and Pakistan, it can boost touristic development. It promotes Pakistan as a tourist destination and invites Chinese tourists to explore the country's rich cultural heritage and natural beauty. In conclusion, infrastructure development and investments under the CPEC create conducive opportunities for tourism growth in Pakistan. Setting up a new hospitality sector, infrastructure, and tourism along the CPEC route paved the way to develop a place of interest to unfurl the untapped potential this country holds for availability of tourism opportunities for both foreign and local expeditioners.

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