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AFGHANISTAN'S DEPENEDENCY TRAP

HOW SIXTY YEARS OF EXTERNAL FUNDING SUBSTITUTED FOR STATE LEGITIMACY AND THE FEAR OF HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF

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Executive Summary

Between 2001 and 2021, the United States appropriated approximately $148 billion purportedly for Afghan reconstruction, but the composition of that spending reveals a structural distortion that conventional aid narratives obscure. Of that total, roughly $88.8 billion (60 percent) went to security-sector programs, including the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, while civilian development, governance, and humanitarian assistance collectively received the remainder. Total U.S. humanitarian assistance across the entire two-decade period reached only $3.9 billion, less than five percent of security expenditure. At its peak, the U.S. military was spending approximately $100 million per day in Afghanistan, while the average volume of international aid from all donors combined was just $7 million per day. This was not a development architecture. It was a security enterprise with a development veneer.

This distortion did not produce a self-sustaining state but instead a rentier polity, one in which governing elites derived authority and resources from external donors rather than from Afghan citizens. The August 2021 collapse was the definitive fiscal event of a state that had never been financially grounded in its own society. Yet understanding this failure requires situating it within a longer history. Modern international development assistance, in its institutional form, was not born as a neutral technical project. It emerged in the late 1940s at the intersection of post-colonial transition and Cold War competition, designed as much to contain Soviet influence and secure access to strategic resources as to promote human welfare.

Since 2021, the operating environment has shifted dramatically. The Taliban's rise to power, combined with international sanctions, financial restrictions, and political non-recognition, has constrained the scale and nature of external engagement. What remains is an aid architecture that sustains humanitarian needs but is structurally incapable of enabling economic recovery or institutional development. Afghanistan risks settling into a new equilibrium: permanent humanitarian dependency without pathways towards stability. This brief examines the political economy of aid that contributed to the Republic's collapse, situates it within the broader colonial genealogy of the international development system, analyses how the same structural risks are re-emerging under new conditions, and offers recommendations for a fundamentally different approach.

Key Findings

- **Aid Dependency:** The Afghan state did not fail suddenly in August 2021. It had been systematically weakened over two decades by an aid architecture that substituted external resources for domestic legitimacy.
- **Legitimacy Displacement:** Because the government relied on donors rather than citizens for revenue, accountability flowed outward to international partners rather than downward to the Afghan population, producing governance oriented toward donor approval rather than public welfare.
- **Institutional Hollowing:** Large-scale aid, delivered through parallel contractor and NGO systems, hollowed out state institutions rather than building them. Citizens attributed development outputs to foreign actors, not the Afghan government.
- **Post-2021 Recurrence:** Since 2021, insufficient and constrained engagement is producing a new form of structural imbalance: humanitarian assistance sustains populations but generates no pathways for economic recovery, domestic revenue, or institutional development.
- **Military Dominance of Aid:** Of the $148 billion appropriated for Afghan reconstruction, approximately $88.8 billion (60 percent) went to security-sector programs. Total U.S. humanitarian assistance over twenty years reached only $3.9 billion, less than five percent of security expenditure. The dominant frame was military, not developmental.
- **Colonial Genealogy of Aid:** Modern international development assistance emerged not as a neutral technical project but at the intersection of post-colonial transition and Cold War competition. Its architecture has consistently privileged donor-country strategic interests over recipient-country ownership, a structural feature, not an implementation failure. Afghanistan's experience must be read within this broader history.
- **Risk of Repetition:** The same structural risks, fragmentation, parallel delivery, weakened accountability, and the absence of a fiscal compact between state and society, are re-emerging under new conditions. Avoiding repetition requires not only reformed delivery mechanisms but a fundamental reckoning with who aid serves and who it is designed by.

The Problem

The dominant post-mortem narratives of Afghanistan's collapse emphasise military failure, insurgent resilience, and diplomatic misjudgment. These accounts are not wrong, but they are also incomplete. Beneath the strategic and security failures lay a more fundamental structural problem: the Afghan state was never fiscally embedded in Afghan society.

The Afghan government was, in effect, funded from the outside. External assistance covered over 75 percent of public expenditure at its peak, according to the World Bank, but there was no coherent plan for turning that money into a state that could eventually stand on its own. This level of dependence did more than support reconstruction and reshaped the foundations of governance, substituting external resources for domestic legitimacy, distorting political incentives, and empowering networks of extraction rather than accountability.

Analytical Framework: Rentier Dynamics and Governance

The Taxation-Representation Nexus

In most states, legitimacy emerges from a reciprocal relationship between citizens and government: citizens contribute through taxation, and the state provides services, security, and representation. This exchange creates accountability. In rentier states, this relationship is severed. States that need not tax their populations face only attenuated demands for representation. Afghanistan’s government did not rely on citizens for revenue but instead it relied on their donors. As a result, accountability flowed outward to international partners rather than inward to Afghan citizens. Ministries were often more responsive to donor priorities than to local needs.

In practice, this meant that Afghan domestic revenue consistently failed to keep pace with expenditure. At its peak, external assistance covered over 75 percent of total public expenditure (World Bank, 2019). By 2010, Afghanistan’s domestic revenue covered only around 11 percent of its operating budget, meaning that even salaries for civil servants and teachers depended almost entirely on donor transfers. When the Kabul Conference of 2010 pledged that donors would channel at least 50 percent of development funds through the Afghan government budget, the actual compliance rate fell well short, with large portions continuing to flow through parallel systems (Cambridge, Ethics and International Affairs, 2021). The predictable result was a government that learned to perform accountability upward to donors, not downward to citizens.

Patron-Client Substitution

In the absence of universal public goods provision, patron-client relations become the primary mechanism of political organization. Individuals seeking employment, contracts, or policy influence are best served through personalized appeals to those with superior resource access rather than through collective political action. This dynamic suppresses horizontal solidarity and organized political opposition while reinforcing vertical clientelism. Afghanistan's post-2001 political competition increasingly revolved around positioning within a system of rent distribution rather than improving governance performance.

The most documented expression of this dynamic was the formation of the post-2001 "commander class." Armed faction leaders who had been instrumental in the 2001 campaign against the Taliban were incorporated into the formal state as governors, ministers, and parliamentarians, while retaining their militia networks and privileged access to external resources. Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili documents how these figures operated in a "parallel universe" of governance: formally part of the state, but functionally operating outside its accountability structures, using access to NATO contracts and USAID funding streams as the primary currency of political power (Journal of Democracy, 2022). Positions within the Ministry of Interior or provincial governorships became not administrative roles but revenue centres, valued for their proximity to external resource flows rather than for any service they might provide to citizens.

Institutional Hollowing Through Parallel Delivery

A significant share of international assistance bypassed Afghan institutions altogether, flowing instead through international contractors, NGOs, and parallel implementation units. These mechanisms were justified as safeguards against corruption or weak capacity. In practice, they hollowed out the state. Citizens who encountered aid providers more frequently than state representatives attributed development outputs, schools, clinics, roads, to foreign actors rather than to the Afghan government. Aid, in this configuration, did not build the state. It replaced it.

The health sector provides perhaps the clearest illustration. From 2002 onward, Afghanistan's Basic Package of Health Services was delivered almost entirely through contracts with 27 NGOs, 17 international, 10 Afghan, rather than through the Ministry of Public Health. While this rapidly expanded service coverage in the short term, it produced a health system that was institutionally owned by external contractors rather than by the Afghan state.

Citizens in NGO-served districts consistently attributed health services to the delivering organization, not to the government. When donor funding contracted after 2014, there was no Ministry infrastructure capable of absorbing the gap. The U.S. military's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which operated from 2003 to 2013 as parallel provincial governorates, reinforced this pattern at scale: provincial governors had no role in resource allocation decisions, and citizens were served, when they were served at all, by NATO and its contractor networks, not by the Afghan state they were nominally part of (Journal of Democracy, 2022).

The Colonial Genealogy of International Development Assistance

The three pathologies described above, the severed taxation-representation nexus, patron-client substitution, and institutional hollowing are structurally embedded in the origins of modern international development assistance itself. Understanding Afghanistan requires confronting that longer history.

The Construction of Afghanistan's Rentier Order

Security Aid and the Amplification of Distortion

While international discourse habitually framed Afghanistan as a development and humanitarian challenge, the expenditure record tells a different story. Of the approximately $148 billion the United States appropriated for Afghan reconstruction between 2002 and 2021, roughly $88.8 billion, approximately 60 percent, was directed to security-sector programs, including the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), U.S. military aid disbursements to Afghanistan totaled $72.7 billion between 2001 and 2020 alone, nearly all channeled through the Department of Defense. By comparison, total U.S. humanitarian assistance over the entire two-decade intervention reached only $3.9 billion, less than five percent of what was spent on security. At its peak, the U.S. military was spending approximately $100 million per day in Afghanistan. The average volume of international aid from all donors combined was just $7 million per day. This was not, in any meaningful fiscal sense, a development enterprise. It was a military operation with a development vocabulary.

The consequences of this imbalance extended beyond the battlefield. Security financing flooded political networks with resources that had no accountability mechanisms comparable even to civilian aid programs. More than half, 57 percent, of total U.S. assistance was directed to the Afghan Security Forces Fund alone. Practices such as the inflation of troop numbers through "ghost soldiers" and salaries paid to non-existent personnel were not simply instances of corruption.

They reflected a system in which access to externally funded security budgets became the primary source of political and economic power. As documented by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), between $26 billion and $29.2 billion of reconstruction funds were ultimately lost to waste, fraud, and abuse, 1,327 documented cases, with discrepancies between reported and actual personnel numbers undermining both fiscal integrity and operational effectiveness. SIGAR estimated that roughly $90 billion was spent on security-sector assistance, yet Afghan security forces collapsed within weeks of the U.S. withdrawal. The return on this investment was not stability but dependency, the very condition the civilian aid apparatus was nominally designed to overcome.

The ghost soldier phenomenon offers the starkest illustration of how security financing became a vehicle for elite extraction. In Helmand Province alone, the incoming police chief reported that approximately 40 to 50 percent of the 26,000 Afghan National Defense and Security Forces listed on the provincial payroll did not physically exist. A 2016 SIGAR assessment found that in some Helmand bases officially manned by 300 soldiers, only 15 were actually present when the base came under attack. Nationwide, official ANDSF strength was recorded at approximately 320,000 in mid-2016; Afghan officials' own internal estimates placed the real number closer to 120,000. Commanders maintained the bank accounts and salary withdrawals of soldiers who had deserted, died, or never existed, with the proceeds flowing upward through the same patronage networks that external security financing had helped to entrench. This was not peripheral fraud. It was the system operating as designed, rewarding proximity to external resource flows over military performance or citizen service.

Legitimacy Foreclosure: Aid as a Substitute for the Social Contract

Compounding these structural challenges was the short-term orientation of donor engagement. Funding cycles prioritized rapid disbursement and visible results within annual or multi-year windows tied to political timelines in donor countries. This emphasis encouraged programs designed to demonstrate immediate outputs: numbers of schools built or individuals trained, rather than long-term institutional development. Such approaches sacrificed sustainability for speed, leaving behind systems incapable of functioning without continued external support.

These structural distortions interacted with Afghanistan's own social and political context in ways that further weakened the state. Historically, governance in Afghanistan has been decentralized, relying on local networks of authority, informal dispute resolution, and community-based legitimacy. The post-2001 state-building project, however, emphasized a centralized governance model that often failed to align with these realities.

Attempts were made to address this disconnect. The National Solidarity Program, launched in 2003, and its successor the Citizens Charter, were designed to channel resources directly through community-level institutions, creating visible links between citizens and the state. In practice, however, both programs struggled to translate local participation into durable accountability. Funding flowed through structures that remained dependent on external support, and the programs' reach was uneven across provinces and conflict-affected areas. The underlying fiscal relationship between state and citizen was never fundamentally altered. Citizens could engage with government-branded programs without developing trust in, or attachment to, the state itself.

Rigorous evaluation of the NSP captures this failure precisely. A World Bank randomized impact evaluation found that NSP's Community Development Councils had "few durable impacts on the identity or affiliation of de facto village leaders, provision of local governance services to male villagers, or the role of representative bodies in local governance", and in some sites actually worsened perceptions of local governance quality by diffusing institutional accountability across competing traditional and formal structures (World Bank Working Paper 7415, 2015). CDCs routinely became dormant outside of active project funding periods. In conservative districts, women, who were formally mandated participants, were largely excluded. And critically, transition from pre-existing traditional power structures to new governance bodies depended almost entirely on the will of those same traditional authorities, who retained de facto decision-making power throughout. The short-term output: block grants disbursed, wells built, schools opened,this was real. The state-building objective was not achieved.

The collapse of the Afghan Republic was therefore not simply the result of a sudden shock. It was the culmination of long-standing structural weaknesses. The speed of the collapse reflected not only a security failure but an absence of legitimacy and institutional cohesion. When external support was reduced, the state had no fiscal base, no deep institutional capacity, and no citizen investment in its survival to sustain itself.

The Post-2021 Shift: New Constraints, Familiar Risks

Since 2021, the operating environment has shifted significantly. The rise of the Taliban, combined with sanctions, financial restrictions, and political non-recognition, has constrained both the scale and nature of international engagement. While humanitarian assistance has continued to flow through alternative channels, overall funding has declined and development investment has largely stalled.

This has created a new form of structural imbalance. Humanitarian aid remains essential in preventing widespread suffering, yet it operates in the absence of broader economic recovery, institutional development, and domestic revenue generation. With limited investment, restricted financial systems, and few pathways for sustainable livelihoods, Afghanistan faces a deepening economic crisis that humanitarian assistance alone cannot resolve.

The Post-2021 Shift: New Constraints, Familiar Risks

No honest account of Afghanistan's reconstruction failure can avoid the question of corruption, but it must ask the question precisely. Corruption is frequently invoked in post-mortems of Afghanistan as a primarily Afghan problem: venal officials, ghost soldiers, warlords skimming donor funds. This framing is not factually wrong, but it is analytically incomplete and politically convenient. It locates the failure in the character of Afghan actors while obscuring the degree to which international actors, contractors, donors, military commands, and Western governments, were themselves active participants in the same corrupt ecosystem. A complete account requires holding all actors to the same standard of scrutiny.

SIGAR's final report documented between $26 billion and $29.2 billion in waste, fraud, and abuse across 1,327 cases, roughly 18 to 20 percent of the $148 billion appropriated for reconstruction. This is significant, but it should be contextualized. The majority of the $148 billion was not stolen by Afghan officials. Much of it never entered the Afghan economy at all. Only approximately 12 percent of U.S. reconstruction assistance between 2002 and 2021 was transferred directly to the Afghan government (Stockman, 2021). The remainder flowed through U.S. and international contractors, multilateral institutions, and parallel delivery systems. Corruption within that contractor layer was substantial and well-documented and largely occurred outside Afghanistan, in corporate boardrooms and billing systems thousands of miles from Kabul.

The most documented case of contractor-side corruption involves the Louis Berger Group (LBG), a New Jersey-based engineering firm that received over $1.4 billion in USAID contracts to build roads, power infrastructure, and schools in Afghanistan. LBG was found to have systematically overbilled USAID at falsely inflated overhead rates across cost-reimbursable contracts spanning nearly two decades. In 2010 the company paid $69 million in criminal and civil penalties, at the time the highest fines ever imposed on a contractor operating in Iraq or Afghanistan.

In 2015, LBG's former chairman and CEO Derish Wolff pleaded guilty to personally directing the scheme, receiving a $4.5 million fine and twelve months of home confinement. The FBI characterized the fraud as "an example of corporate and personal greed" carried out by "numerous LBG employees at the direction of Wolff." Despite the conviction, LBG continued to receive USAID contracts. SIGAR Inspector General John Sopko was sufficiently alarmed by this pattern to write directly to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, questioning why firms with documented criminal histories remained among the top recipients of reconstruction contracts (U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2015).

None of this diminishes the reality and gravity of Afghan elite corruption, which was extensive, well-documented, and directly harmful to ordinary Afghans. It must be named clearly and held to the same evidentiary standard. The Kabul Bank scandal of 2010 is the most consequential single case. Kabul Bank, Afghanistan's largest commercial bank, was found to have funneled approximately $900 million through a sophisticated fraud scheme involving unsecured loans, fake corporations, and fictitious employees to a network of politically connected individuals. At the center of the scheme were the bank's founder Sher Khan Farnood and CEO Khalilullah Ferozi, who were convicted in 2013 and received five-year sentences. But the fraud extended well beyond them: 22 individuals were ultimately charged, including shareholders with direct ties to the highest levels of government. Mahmoud Karzai, brother of President Hamid Karzai, and Zahid Fahim, brother of First Vice President Qasim Fahim, held shareholdings and received loans later found to be irregular. The bank's collapse forced an $825 million emergency government bailout, equivalent to roughly one-twelfth of Afghanistan's entire annual economic output. One million Afghans had accounts at Kabul Bank, including thousands of soldiers, civil servants, and teachers, the people most dependent on the state's capacity to function. The scandal did not merely drain public funds. It demonstrated that the state and its financial infrastructure had been captured as a vehicle for elite extraction.

A crucial detail, however, is what the U.S. government did when it knew. The Washington Post's analysis of the Afghanistan Papers, confidential government interviews conducted as part of the Lessons Learned project, documents that senior U.S. officials were fully aware of the Kabul Bank fraud and of broader elite corruption and chose strategic partnership over accountability. A senior U.S. Treasury official posted to Kabul described the situation as a "20 out of 10" on a corruption scale.

Peter Galbraith, then deputy UN envoy to Afghanistan, was removed from his post after raising concerns that the international community was helping to cover up the extent of election fraud. Multiple officials described a system in which prosecuting corrupt Afghan elites would have meant dismantling the political coalition the U.S. depended upon to maintain the appearance of a functioning government. The U.S. made a calculated choice to tolerate Afghan elite corruption because accountability would have destabilized its own strategic position. That choice belongs in any honest account of what went wrong.

The deeper problem is that Afghan and international corruption did not operate as separate systems, they operated as one. SIGAR found that an Afghan businessman paid $1.25 million in bribes to American servicemembers to secure military fuel contracts. American defense contractors evaded taxes on hundreds of millions in Afghan reconstruction income. SIGAR investigators identified Afghan officials engaged in kickbacks and embezzlement who were placed off-limits to investigators because they were simultaneously working for U.S. intelligence agencies. As SIGAR's acting inspector general Gene Aloise stated directly: "We would identify guys who were bad guys who earned kickbacks, bribes, whatever, but they could have been working for the CIA or another agency, so we were told, 'hands off.'" The corruption ecosystem was joint property. Afghan commanders, U.S. military officers, international contractors, and political elites on both sides participated in and benefited from the same flows of externally-generated rent. Assigning blame exclusively to one side is not only historically inaccurate, it is a form of political convenience that has consistently prevented the structural reforms necessary to avoid repetition.

Breaking the Pattern: Lessons and a Path Forward for Afghanistan

Afghanistan's twenty-year experience offers five structural lessons that must inform any future engagement, not only in Afghanistan, but in any post-conflict or fragile-state context where external actors seek to support stabilization.

First, the composition of external spending matters as much as its volume. Sixty percent of reconstruction spending went to security; less than three percent to humanitarian assistance. Future engagements must require spending ratios that prioritize civilian institution-building and domestic revenue mobilization, with military assistance accompanied by binding accountability frameworks phased toward local fiscal absorption.

Second, aid must create fiscal compacts, not substitute for them. The central failure was severing the taxation-representation relationship. Domestic revenue mobilization must be a first-order objective, not a footnote. This means prioritizing tax administration, property rights, and contract enforcement over budget support that substitutes for domestic fiscal capacity.

Third, delivery architecture must strengthen, not bypass, existing institutions. Routing aid through international contractors to avoid corruption risk produced exactly the institutional hollowing it claimed to prevent. Where state institutions are weak, the answer is capacity investment, not permanent bypass. Longer-term funding cycles must replace rapid disbursement metrics that reward volume over function.

Fourth, for Afghanistan specifically, engagement must separate the population from the regime. Sanctions designed to constrain the Taliban are simultaneously strangling economic recovery. A differentiated approach must enable private sector activity, remittance flows, and community-based development without routing resources through Taliban structures. Community Development Councils, institutions of local participation under the NSP; offer an institutional architecture worth rebuilding, alongside engagement with diaspora and Afghan civil society.

Fifth, the system itself must be reformed, not only its implementation. The colonial legacy of aid has direct operational consequences. Aid architectures that privilege donor-country contractors, impose external conditionality, and measure success by disbursement will reproduce dependency regardless of technical quality. Breaking this pattern requires Afghan-led priority-setting, genuine power-sharing in program design, and evaluation frameworks that center Afghan welfare over donor reporting requirements.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to international donors, multilateral institutions, and governments engaged in Afghanistan or in comparable fragile state contexts.

Priority Area	Recommended Action
Aid Architecture	Move away from large, centralized funding flows and parallel delivery mechanisms. Prioritize decentralized approaches aligned with local systems and accountable institutions, even where this requires greater time and flexibility. Off-budget mechanisms should be permitted only where no alternative exists, with mandatory sunset
Domestic Revenue	Treat domestic revenue mobilization as a primary reconstruction objective, not an afterthought. Sustainable governance requires a fiscal compact between state and society that cannot be manufactured through external subsidy. Commission multi-year revenue mobilization strategies anchored in property rights reform
Private Sector & Economic Engagement	International donors and development finance institutions should use blended finance, loan guarantees, and technical assistance to support local entrepreneurs in sectors with high employment potential, including agriculture, small manufacturing, and trade. Delivery should flow through community-based organizations
Local Legitimacy	Rebuild legitimacy through sustained engagement with local institutions and communities. Rather than bypassing existing structures, external actors should seek to strengthen them. Sustainable governance cannot be imposed from the outside; it must be grounded in the social and political realities of the country.
Incentive Alignment	Move beyond metrics focused on disbursement and short-term outputs toward measures that capture durability, trust, and local ownership. Donor conditionality should shift from technical compliance indicators toward genuine accountability outcomes: evidence that resources are reaching intended beneficiaries and that
Transparency	Embed transparency mechanisms in aid delivery design from the outset. Advances in digital tools offer new opportunities to track resources and verify outcomes. Such mechanisms must be designed to empower local actors rather than impose additional layers of external control.
Sanctions Policy	Recalibrate the interaction between aid, sanctions, and economic policy. Sanctions designed to constrain the Taliban government are simultaneously constraining economic recovery and humanitarian response. A more differentiated approach is needed, one that maintains political pressure while enabling pathways for livelihoods

Further Reading

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15 Arturo Escobar, Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Escobar traces the origins of development discourse to late colonialism, arguing that postwar development policies became mechanisms of control comparable to their colonial predecessors. Quote on development as a mechanism of control cited from the Princeton University Press edition.
16 Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972). Rodney defines underdevelopment not as the absence of development but as the active process by which societies are impoverished through interaction with others, situating African poverty within a framework of imperialist extraction rather than internal deficit.
17 Dambisa Moyo, Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009). Moyo argues that official development assistance has fostered corruption, distorted economies, and created cultures of dependency, producing in African states the same rentier dynamic that rentier state theory predicts: governments accountable to donors, not citizens. Her critique applies with particular force to the Afghan case.
18 Claudia Chwieroth, “Colonial Legacy and Foreign Aid: Decomposing the Colonial Bias,” International Interactions 45, no. 3 (2019). On how colonial relationships shape contemporary aid allocation patterns, with donor countries directing assistance disproportionately toward former colonies for strategic rather than needs-based reasons.
19 Harry S. Truman, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949 (Point Four Speech). Truman’s fourth foreign policy point explicitly framed technical assistance to “underdeveloped areas” as a counter to Soviet influence, establishing from the outset that modern foreign aid was a geopolitical instrument. The full text is available through the U.S. National Archives.

This was not a development architecture. It was a security enterprise with a development veneer.

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