

SCHOLAR EYE

CSS EXAMINATION SERIES



SAARC

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

A COMPLETE REFERENCE COMPENDIUM

CURRENT AFFAIRS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS — 2026 EDITION

ESTABLISHED 8 DECEMBER 1985

HEADQUARTERS KATHMANDU, NEPAL

MEMBER STATES EIGHT

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Note for CSS Aspirants: This guide is compiled for the Current Affairs, Pakistan Affairs and International Relations components of the CSS examination. Facts on leadership positions and diplomatic status are current as of August 2026 and should be re-verified closer to the exam date, since such positions periodically change.

Introduction & Quick Facts

The **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** is the principal political and economic organization of South Asia, established to foster collective self-reliance, accelerate economic growth, and promote social progress and cultural development among the nations of the region. It is the world's most densely populated regional bloc, representing nearly a quarter of the global population, yet it remains — by trade volume — one of the least economically integrated regions on earth.

SAARC was born out of the vision of regional statesmen who believed that the shared history, geography, culture and economic challenges of South Asian nations demanded an institutional platform for cooperation that went beyond bilateral relations. Since its founding, SAARC has aimed to serve as a forum where member states could jointly address common problems — poverty, terrorism, environmental degradation, and underdevelopment — while explicitly steering clear of contentious bilateral and political disputes.

ESTABLISHED 8 December 1985	HEADQUARTERS Kathmandu, Nepal
MEMBER STATES 8 Countries	OFFICIAL LANGUAGE English
FOUNDING SUMMIT Dhaka, Bangladesh	CHARTER SIGNED By 7 Founding Leaders

"SAARC represents nearly one-fifth of humanity and one of the world's fastest-growing economic regions, yet remains among its least integrated — trade within the bloc accounts for only a small fraction of members' total trade."

Why SAARC matters for Pakistan: As a founding member, Pakistan has been central to SAARC's history — hosting the 4th Summit (1988) and the 12th Summit (2004) in Islamabad, and being the intended host of the stalled 19th Summit. SAARC frequently appears in the CSS syllabus under Pakistan Affairs, Current Affairs, and International Relations papers, particularly regarding regional connectivity, SAFTA, and India–Pakistan dynamics.

History & Establishment

The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia was first floated in the late 1970s by **President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh**, who envisioned a platform through which the smaller South Asian states could collectively engage with larger neighbours and address shared developmental challenges. He circulated the proposal to regional governments in 1980.

After years of diplomatic groundwork — including meetings of Foreign Secretaries in Colombo (1981) and subsequent consultations — the foreign ministers of seven South Asian countries met in New Delhi in August 1983 and adopted the **Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC)**, launching the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) covering areas such as agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology and health.

1980	Bangladeshi Proposal — President Ziaur Rahman proposes a framework for regional cooperation in South Asia.
1981	Colombo Meeting — Foreign Secretaries of seven South Asian states meet to discuss the proposal.
1983	Declaration on SARC — Adopted in New Delhi; the Integrated Programme of Action is launched.
1985	SAARC Founded — The Charter is formally adopted at the First Summit in Dhaka (7–8 December), establishing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.
1987	Secretariat Established — The SAARC Secretariat is inaugurated in Kathmandu, Nepal (16 January).
2005	Afghanistan Admitted — At the 13th Summit in Dhaka, Afghanistan joins as the eighth member (formally admitted in 2007).

2006 **SAFTA Enforced** — The South Asian Free Trade Area agreement comes into force on 1 January 2006.

Founding Members (1985): Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka signed the Charter at the First SAARC Summit. Afghanistan later joined as the eighth member.

The Charter was signed by the heads of state or government of the seven founding countries on **8 December 1985** in Dhaka, formally establishing SAARC as an inter-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the welfare of South Asia's peoples through collective, non-confrontational cooperation.

Objectives & Guiding Principles

Article I of the SAARC Charter lays out the organization's core objectives:

1. To promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and improve their quality of life.
2. To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region, providing all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and realize their full potential.
3. To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia.
4. To contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems.
5. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.
6. To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries.
7. To strengthen cooperation among member states in international forums on matters of common interest.
8. To cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

Article II — Guiding Principles establish the framework within which cooperation must occur:

- Cooperation shall be based on **sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs**, and mutual benefit.
- Such cooperation shall **not be a substitute** for bilateral and multilateral cooperation, but shall complement them.
- Such cooperation shall be **consistent** with bilateral and multilateral obligations of the member states.

Exam Tip: A hallmark and frequently-tested feature of SAARC is that its Charter explicitly excludes "**bilateral and contentious issues**" from its deliberations. This provision — intended to keep disputes like Kashmir off the agenda — has also been cited as a structural weakness that limits SAARC's effectiveness whenever bilateral tensions (particularly between India and Pakistan) spill over.

Decision-making within SAARC is governed by the principle of **unanimity**, and all decisions at every level are to be taken on the basis of consensus. Bilateral and contentious issues are excluded from the deliberations of the Association — a rule intended to keep SAARC insulated from regional political rivalries.

SECTION 04

Member States

SAARC comprises eight member states — seven founding members and Afghanistan, which joined in 2007. Together they cover roughly 3% of the world's land area and are home to close to a quarter of the world's population.

COUNTRY	CAPITAL	STATUS	JOINED
Afghanistan	Kabul	Member	2007
Bangladesh	Dhaka	Founding Member	1985
Bhutan	Thimphu	Founding Member	1985
India	New Delhi	Founding Member	1985
Maldives	Malé	Founding Member	1985
Nepal	Kathmandu	Founding Member	1985
Pakistan	Islamabad	Founding Member	1985
Sri Lanka	Colombo	Founding Member	1985

Pakistan	Founding Member
Capital: Islamabad	
Hosted Summits: 4th (1988), 12th (2004)	
Notable: Was to host the stalled 19th Summit	

India	Founding Member
Capital: New Delhi	
Hosted Summits: 2nd (1986), 8th (1995), 14th (2007)	
Notable: Largest economy in SAARC	

Bangladesh	Founding Member
Capital: Dhaka	
Hosted Summits: 1st (1985), 7th (1993), 13th (2005)	
Notable: Birthplace of the SAARC idea	

Nepal	Founding Member
Capital: Kathmandu	
Hosted Summits: 3rd (1987), 11th (2002), 18th (2014)	
Notable: Permanent host of the SAARC Secretariat	

Sri Lanka	Founding Member
Capital: Colombo	
Hosted Summits: 6th (1991), 10th (1998), 15th (2008)	

Maldives	Founding Member
Capital: Malé	
Hosted Summits: 5th (1990), 9th (1997), 17th (2011)	

Bhutan	Founding Member
Capital: Thimphu	
Hosted Summits: 16th (2010)	

Afghanistan	8th Member (2007)
Capital: Kabul	
Notable: Newest and youngest member state	

Observer States & Dialogue Partners

Beyond its eight members, SAARC has granted **Observer status** to nine countries and the European Union, reflecting international interest in South Asian regional cooperation. Observers may attend SAARC Summits and ministerial meetings but do not participate in decision-making.

OBSERVER	OBSERVER
Australia	Japan
China	Mauritius
European Union	Myanmar
Iran	South Korea
United States	—

Exam Tip: China's repeated interest in becoming a full SAARC member (backed by Pakistan) has historically been a point of friction with India, which favours keeping the forum South-Asia-centric. This is a recurring current affairs/IR talking point.

Observer status timeline (illustrative): Observer status has been granted incrementally since 2005 — Japan, China and the European Union were among the earliest observers admitted at the 13th Summit (2005) in Dhaka, followed by the United States, South Korea and others in subsequent years, and Mauritius more recently.

SAARC also maintains institutional linkages with organizations such as the **United Nations** (as an observer), the **Commonwealth Secretariat**, and various UN specialized agencies, reflecting its aspiration to engage constructively with the wider international system.

Organizational Structure

SAARC's institutional architecture is designed as a hierarchy of political, ministerial and technical bodies, all operating on the principle of consensus:

- **Summit (Meeting of Heads of State/Government):** The highest decision-making authority in SAARC. Originally meant to be held annually, summits are now convened roughly every two years, hosted in rotation among member states.
- **Council of Ministers:** Comprises the Foreign Ministers of member states. Formulates policy, reviews progress, decides on new areas of cooperation, and meets at least twice a year.
- **Standing Committee:** Composed of the Foreign Secretaries of member states. Responsible for the overall monitoring and coordination of programmes, mobilization of resources, and identification of new areas of cooperation.
- **Programming Committee:** Comprises senior officials; assists the Standing Committee, and scrutinizes the calendar of activities and budget of the Secretariat.
- **Technical Committees:** Bodies of subject experts responsible for implementing, coordinating and monitoring programmes in specific areas of cooperation (e.g., agriculture, education, health, environment).
- **SAARC Secretariat:** The administrative and coordinating hub of the organization, headquartered in Kathmandu, Nepal, headed by a Secretary-General.
- **Regional Centres:** Specialized institutions established in various member states to promote cooperation in specific technical fields (agriculture, disaster management, energy, etc.).
- **SAARC Development Fund (SDF):** The umbrella financial institution funding SAARC projects in social, economic and infrastructure sectors, headquartered in Thimphu, Bhutan.

*Decision-making at every level of SAARC — from the Summit down to Technical Committees — is based strictly on **unanimity**, and bilateral or contentious issues are kept off the formal agenda.*

This layered structure means that political will at the Summit level is essential for SAARC's functioning: when Head-of-State-level engagement stalls (as it has since 2014), the technical and Secretariat-level machinery can continue routine work, but new political initiatives and major agreements cannot move forward.

SAARC Secretariat & Secretaries-General

The **SAARC Secretariat** was established in Kathmandu, Nepal, on **16 January 1987**, and was inaugurated by King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah of Nepal. It coordinates and monitors the implementation of SAARC activities, services the various SAARC meetings, and serves as the channel of communication between the Association and other international bodies.

The Secretariat is headed by a **Secretary-General**, appointed by the Council of Ministers on a **non-renewable three-year term**, following a rotational, alphabetical order among member states. The Secretary-General holds a rank equivalent to that of a foreign secretary and is assisted by eight Directors seconded from each member state.

SECRETARY-GENERAL		COUNTRY	TENURE
Abul Ahsan (1st)		Bangladesh	1987 – 1989
Ten further Secretaries-General served between 1989 and 2017, rotating alphabetically among member states			
Arjun Bahadur Thapa		Nepal	2014 – 2017
Amjad Hussain B. Sial		Pakistan	2017 – 2020
Esala Ruwan Weerakoon		Sri Lanka	2020 – 2023
Md. Golam Sarwar	CURRENT	Bangladesh	Since October 2023

Current Secretary-General: Md. Golam Sarwar of Bangladesh assumed office as the SAARC Secretary-General in 2023, becoming the third Bangladeshi national to hold the

post (after Abul Ahsan, the first-ever Secretary-General). Sources vary slightly on official succession numbering, reflecting short transitional/acting periods between some tenures.

SAARC Chairmanship: Unlike the Secretary-General's post, the Chairmanship of SAARC is held by the head of state/government of the country that most recently hosted (or is hosting) the Summit — a rotating, largely ceremonial and diplomatic leadership role rather than a fixed-term administrative office. Because the 19th Summit (due to be hosted by Pakistan) has not taken place, **Nepal** — host of the 18th Summit (2014) — has continued to hold the Chairmanship on a de facto, extended basis.

SECTION 08

Summits of SAARC (1985 – Present)

Eighteen SAARC Summits have been held to date. The 19th Summit, due to be hosted by Pakistan in Islamabad, has remained postponed since 2016 due to regional political tensions.

#	HOST CITY / COUNTRY	YEAR
1st	Dhaka, Bangladesh	1985
2nd	Bangalore, India	1986
3rd	Kathmandu, Nepal	1987
4th	Islamabad, Pakistan	1988
5th	Malé, Maldives	1990
6th	Colombo, Sri Lanka	1991
7th	Dhaka, Bangladesh	1993
8th	New Delhi, India	1995
9th	Malé, Maldives	1997
10th	Colombo, Sri Lanka	1998
11th	Kathmandu, Nepal	2002
12th	Islamabad, Pakistan	2004
13th	Dhaka, Bangladesh	2005
14th	New Delhi, India	2007
15th	Colombo, Sri Lanka	2008

16th	Thimphu, Bhutan		2010
17th	Addu City, Maldives		2011
18th	Kathmandu, Nepal		2014
19th	Islamabad, Pakistan	STALLED	Planned 2016

The 19th Summit: Scheduled for 9–10 November 2016 in Islamabad, the summit was called off after India announced it would not attend, citing cross-border terrorism concerns following the September 2016 Uri attack. Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan followed suit, and Sri Lanka also expressed reservations — denying the quorum needed to proceed. Pakistan stated it remained committed to hosting the summit once conditions allowed, but as of 2026, more than a decade later, no new date has been fixed and no summit-level SAARC meeting has taken place since 2014.

Since the stalled 19th Summit, SAARC's political engagement has remained largely frozen at the Head-of-State level, though foreign-ministers' level and technical/Secretariat-level activities — including SAARC Internship Programmes and thematic meetings — have continued sporadically.

Key Agreements & Achievements

Despite persistent political constraints, SAARC has produced a number of substantive agreements and initiatives over four decades:

- **SAPTA (South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement), 1993:** The first formal step toward regional trade liberalization, providing tariff concessions among member states; came into force in 1995.
- **SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area), 2004:** Signed at the 12th Summit in Islamabad and enforced from **1 January 2006**, SAFTA aims to progressively reduce tariffs to promote free trade across the region.
- **SAARC Social Charter (2004):** Commits member states to social development goals including poverty alleviation, population stabilization, gender empowerment, and child welfare.
- **SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (1987) & Additional Protocol (2004):** An early and significant regional counter-terrorism framework.
- **SAARC Food Bank (2007):** Established to provide regional food security through reserve stocks during emergencies.
- **SAARC Development Fund (SDF), 2010:** Headquartered in Thimphu, Bhutan; finances development projects across Social, Economic and Infrastructure windows.
- **South Asian University (2010):** Established in New Delhi, India, as a regional institution of higher learning open to students from all member states.
- **SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme:** Facilitates travel for specified categories of dignitaries, officials, judges, journalists and businesspersons across member states without individual visas.
- **SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO):** Based in Islamabad, Pakistan, providing a regional mechanism for arbitration of commercial and other disputes.

- **SAARCFINANCE:** A network of central bank governors and finance secretaries promoting regional monetary and financial cooperation.
-

Exam Tip: SAFTA is one of SAARC's most frequently tested achievements. Remember: **signed 2004 (12th Summit, Islamabad) → enforced 1 January 2006.** Despite SAFTA, intra-regional trade among SAARC members remains extremely low (commonly cited around 5% of members' total trade) — a key criticism of the bloc's economic impact.

SECTION 10

SAARC Regional Centres

To decentralize implementation and build specialized expertise, SAARC established a number of Regional Centres hosted across member states, each governed by a board with representation from all members. Over time, several centres have been consolidated into the Secretariat to streamline operations, but the model remains a defining feature of SAARC's institutional design.

REGIONAL CENTRE / BODY	FOCUS AREA	HOST
SAARC Agriculture Centre	Agricultural research & development	Bangladesh
SAARC Disaster Management Centre	Disaster risk reduction	India
SAARC Energy Centre	Energy cooperation	Pakistan
SAARC Cultural Centre	Promotion of shared culture & heritage	Sri Lanka
SAARC Forestry Centre	Forestry & environment	Bhutan
SAARC Coastal Zone Mgmt. Centre	Coastal & marine resource management	Maldives
SAARC Development Fund	Regional development financing	Bhutan
SAARC Arbitration Council	Commercial & legal dispute arbitration	Pakistan
SAARC Standards Organisation	Regional standardization of goods & services	Bangladesh
South Asian University	Higher education	India

Note: The exact list and status of Regional Centres has evolved — several thematic centres (Meteorological Research, Human Resource Development, Information,

Tuberculosis/HIV) were consolidated into the Secretariat in Kathmandu in 2016–17 to improve efficiency. Aspirants should treat the host country of each centre as the more stable, testable fact.

SECTION 11

SAARC and Pakistan

Pakistan has been a founding member of SAARC since its establishment in 1985 and has played an active role in shaping the organization's agenda, particularly around regional connectivity, trade and counter-terrorism cooperation.

- **Summit Hosting:** Pakistan hosted the 4th SAARC Summit in Islamabad (1988) and the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad (2004), at which SAFTA was signed.
- **19th Summit:** Pakistan was scheduled to host the 19th Summit in Islamabad in November 2016. The summit was postponed after India, followed by Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan, withdrew, citing cross-border terrorism concerns. Pakistan has repeatedly reaffirmed its readiness to host the summit whenever consensus is reached.
- **Host of Key Institutions:** Pakistan hosts the SAARC Energy Centre and the SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO), both based in Islamabad.
- **Leadership Roles:** Pakistani diplomats have served as SAARC Secretary-General — including Amjad Hussain B. Sial (2017–2020).
- **Policy Position:** Pakistan has consistently advocated for reviving summit-level engagement, greater regional connectivity (including transit trade), and expanded SAARC membership (including for China as a full member) — positions that have often placed it at odds with India within the forum.

Exam Angle: Pakistan's SAARC policy is frequently examined alongside its parallel engagement with alternative or overlapping regional platforms — such as the **Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)** and China-led connectivity initiatives — as SAARC's stagnation has pushed member states toward other regional and sub-regional groupings (e.g., **BIMSTEC**, which notably excludes Pakistan).

For Pakistan, SAARC remains diplomatically significant as a forum for South Asian engagement, even though its practical utility has diminished considerably since summit-level talks stalled in 2016.

Challenges & Criticism

Despite four decades of existence, SAARC is widely regarded — including by many South Asian policymakers and analysts — as one of the world's least effective regional organizations. Key structural and political challenges include:

- **India–Pakistan Rivalry:** Persistent bilateral tensions between the region's two largest members have repeatedly disrupted SAARC's summit calendar and undermined consensus-based decision-making, most visibly with the stalled 19th Summit since 2016.
- **Consensus Requirement:** The Charter's insistence on unanimous decision-making, while designed to protect sovereignty, gives any single member effective veto power — making ambitious joint action extremely difficult.
- **Exclusion of Bilateral Issues:** While intended to keep SAARC functional despite disputes, this exclusion also prevents the forum from directly addressing the very tensions (e.g., Kashmir, cross-border terrorism allegations) that most disrupt regional cooperation.
- **Low Intra-Regional Trade:** Despite SAFTA, intra-SAARC trade remains a small fraction of members' total trade — commonly cited at under 5% — compared to far higher intra-regional trade shares in blocs like ASEAN or the EU.
- **India's Asymmetric Size:** India's economic and demographic dominance within the bloc has at times fostered mistrust among smaller neighbours, complicating collective action.
- **Rise of Alternative Platforms:** The stagnation of SAARC has encouraged member states — especially India — to invest more diplomatic energy in overlapping regional groupings such as **BIMSTEC** (Bay of Bengal Initiative), which excludes Pakistan, prompting debate over SAARC's continued relevance.
- **Weak Institutional Enforcement:** SAARC bodies generally lack binding enforcement mechanisms, relying on voluntary compliance by member states.

Balanced View for Essays/Answers: While SAARC's summit-level paralysis is real, technical, Secretariat-level, and civil-society cooperation (education, disaster response, cultural exchange) has continued. Many South Asian scholars argue SAARC's institutional framework remains valuable and could be revitalized given sufficient political will — making "reform vs. replace" a common essay/CSS debate.

Current Status & The Way Forward (2026)

As of 2026, SAARC's summit-level diplomacy remains stalled — more than a decade has passed since the 18th Summit (Kathmandu, 2014), and the 19th Summit, intended for Islamabad, has still not been rescheduled. Nepal has continued to hold the Chairmanship on a de facto, extended basis in the absence of a new host summit.

CURRENT SECRETARY-GENERAL

Md. Golam Sarwar (Bangladesh)

CURRENT CHAIR (DE FACTO)

Nepal

LAST SUMMIT HELD

18th, Kathmandu, 2014

Foreign ministers of member states have periodically met informally on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to discuss reviving the summit process, but no breakthrough has materialized. Meanwhile, working-level activity has continued: the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu runs ongoing programmes such as the **SAARC Internship Programme**, technical committee meetings, and regional-centre projects, though these fall well short of the ambitious cooperation envisioned at SAARC's founding.

Many South Asian diplomats and analysts continue to call for reviving summit-level SAARC engagement, arguing that the region's shared developmental challenges — climate vulnerability, poverty, connectivity gaps, and public health — require a functioning collective platform regardless of bilateral frictions. Others argue that overlapping frameworks such as BIMSTEC, sub-regional groupings (like BBIN — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal), and bilateral/plurilateral arrangements are increasingly filling the vacuum left by SAARC's paralysis.

For Current Affairs Preparation: Because leadership positions, chairmanships and diplomatic developments around SAARC can change, aspirants should cross-check the latest developments closer to their exam date via reliable sources such as the official SAARC Secretariat website (saarc-sec.org) and major South Asian news outlets.

Quick Revision — Important MCQs

Q1. When was SAARC established?

A) 1983 B) 1985 C) 1987 D) 1990

Answer: B) 1985 (8 December, 1st Summit, Dhaka)

Q2. Where is the SAARC Secretariat headquartered?

A) New Delhi B) Islamabad C) Kathmandu D) Dhaka

Answer: C) Kathmandu, Nepal (established 16 January 1987)

Q3. Who proposed the idea that led to SAARC's formation?

A) Zulfikar Ali Bhutto B) Ziaur Rahman C) Indira Gandhi D) J.R. Jayewardene

Answer: B) President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh

Q4. Which country joined SAARC as its 8th member?

A) Myanmar B) China C) Afghanistan D) Iran

Answer: C) Afghanistan (admitted 2007)

Q5. When did SAFTA come into force?

A) 1 Jan 2004 B) 1 Jan 2006 C) 1 Jan 2008 D) 1 Jan 2010

Answer: B) 1 January 2006

Q6. The 19th SAARC Summit was to be hosted by which country?

A) India B) Nepal C) Pakistan D) Bangladesh

Answer: C) Pakistan (Islamabad, planned November 2016 — postponed)

Q7. Which body constitutes the highest decision-making authority of SAARC?

A) Council of Ministers B) Standing Committee C) The Summit D) Secretariat

Answer: C) The Summit (Meeting of Heads of State/Government)

Q8. Who is the current Secretary-General of SAARC (as of 2026)?

A) Esala Weerakoon B) Amjad Hussain Sial C) Md. Golam Sarwar D) Arjun Bahadur Thapa

Answer: C) Md. Golam Sarwar (Bangladesh), since 2023

Q9. Where is the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) headquartered?

A) Colombo B) Thimphu C) Malé D) Kabul

Answer: B) Thimphu, Bhutan

Q10. How many summits has Pakistan hosted?

A) One B) Two C) Three D) None

Answer: B) Two — 4th Summit (1988) and 12th Summit (2004), both in Islamabad

Remember the Golden Rule: SAARC = 8 members, founded **1985**, HQ in **Kathmandu**, Charter excludes **bilateral/contentious issues**, and functions on **unanimous consensus**.



SAARC — Complete Reference Guide

Compiled for CSS exam preparation covering International Relations, Current Affairs and Pakistan Affairs. All facts should be re-verified against current sources closer to examination dates, given the evolving nature of regional diplomacy.

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