

Geopolitics of India-Sri Lanka Relations

The Way Forward

Edited by

Asantha Senevirathna



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Contents

- 1**
Geopolitical Dynamics of Post-Colonial Indo-Sri Lanka Relations..... 1
Asantha Senevirathna

- 2**
Indo-Pacific Geopolitics and the Changing Sri Lanka-India Relations 20
M. Mayilvaganan & Angelin Archana

- 3**
Strategizing Humanitarian Affairs: The Bilateral Relations between India and Sri Lanka Since 2009.....35
Menik Wakkumbura

- 4**
India-Sri Lanka Fishermen Issue: An Indian Perspective 50
Gulbin Sultana

- 5**
Political Realities of Forced Migration Instigated in the Spectrum of Ethnicity: The Story of Sri Lanka and India 71
Niruka Sanjeewani

- 6**
Indian Ocean and Maritime Security of India and Sri Lanka 84
Suresh Rangarajan

- 7**
“China Factor” in India-Sri Lanka Relations..... 110
Chulanee Attanayake

- 8**
India-Sri Lanka Relations in the Indian Ocean Region..... 139
Deeksha Goel

9

**Power, Dominance and Indo-Pacific Strategy: The United States
Inscription and Rising Mutuality in Indo-Sri Lanka Relations 151**
Harsha Senanayake

10

**Emerging Power Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Sri Lanka's Strategic
Choices for Engaging with India, China and the United States 169**
Rajiv Ranjan & Asantha Senevirathna

INDEX..... 189

List of Contributors

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3

Strategizing Humanitarian Affairs: The Bilateral Relations between India and Sri Lanka Since 2009

Menik Wakkumbura

Introduction

The international humanitarian agenda involves external assistance that goes beyond relief, including a variety of external involvement in reconstruction and rehabilitation. International humanitarian efforts have become beneficial for states recovering from internal conflicts and wars. Variety of scholarly criticisms are directed at externally supported post-war engagements held by both state and non-state actors. The post-war engagements of external actors' focus on reaching the development and wellbeing of people affected by conflicts and wars. The entreaty for post-war humanitarian recovery is particularly widely recognized. Sri Lanka, since the end of the civil war in 2009, has been largely supported by various external actors—India has become a key bilateral partner for recovery and humanitarian support.

India's interest in assisting Sri Lanka is based on numerous reasons. The geographical proximity allows India to intervene first in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, India's relations with Sri Lanka are historical. India's involvement in Sri Lanka's current affairs is driven by some of their foreign policy enactments named as the *neighbourhood first policy*. Furthermore, it is noted that bilateral affairs of two states range from more cultural and political reasons, including Tamil kinship, and the southern state of Tamil Nadu in India maintains close community affiliation with the northern Tamil communities of Sri Lanka. The civil war in Sri Lanka (1983–2009) allowed for a number of external interventions from its neighbouring great power, India. A large number of Tamils fled to Tamil Nadu, where India was compelled to provide them with temporary shelter. In 1987, India intervened for a political settlement to solve Sri Lankan Tamils' self-

determination problem by signing the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. India has intervened with a political proposal on the devolution of power to resolve Sri Lanka's ongoing Tamil ethnic problem in favour of Sri Lankan Tamils. Over the period of time, India's humanitarian support becomes very much highlighted—particularly, since the end of the civil war in the country. It is the single state offering the highest amount of bilateral donor assistance for housing reconstruction for both war recovery projects in the Northern and the Eastern Provinces and the plantation sector in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Added to these post-war assistances, India and Sri Lanka have maintained their cooperation in the voluntary repatriation of Tamil refugees. The voluntary refugees' repatriation is facilitated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These bilateral efforts reflect India's gradual shift of intervention style from its traditional assertive role—intervening in Sri Lanka's politics of decentralization of powers towards other aspects of humanitarian support, relief and development efforts.

This chapter considers its examination as to what extent India transformed its traditional bilateral ties to consider humanitarianism as a gesture of cooperation and friendship between the two countries for strengthening bilateralism. The examination proposes that India's foreign policy has become a central strategy for maintaining India's affairs in the region and particularly with its neighbouring states—Sri Lanka has become a key counterpart to India. The chapter explains the significance of India's humanitarian affairs in shaping a new phase of ties.

Humanitarian Affairs

Literature examines various notions about humanitarianism—various initiatives are underway about international aid and assistance as key tools for international humanitarian cooperation. The work of Hugo Grotius promotes the *Grotius Theory* emphasizing the need for international law provisions for international cooperation and encourages states' responsibility for international peace. There are a variety of multi-disciplinary theoretical approaches to 'humanitarianism'—examining the use of humanitarianism for international efforts when dealing with conflict-affected societies. It is noted that both traditional and modern approaches have established a universal value system for international humanitarian endeavours.

The theory of ‘Liberal Peace’ shows the possibility of external support to states affected by conflicts and wars. Liberal peace is particularly concerned with a long-term establishments such as attempts to eradicate war consequences and acquire justice, democratic institutionalization and establishing of liberal norms. Liberal Peace also functions as an approach for social and economic wellbeing (Richmond, 2012). Learning from various empirical experiences, there are plenty of events that show how external support is successful in post-war peacebuilding of those conflict-affected societies. Scholars like Roger Mac Ginty (2010) and Thania Paffenholz (2015) examine hybridity in peacebuilding—that kind of hybridity considers both domestic and international cooperation and a high level of support from the external initiatives. Likewise, post-war peacebuilding has progressed in by the support of external involvement. Global humanitarianism projects thus seemed achieved effective results.

There are variety of ways defining the humanitarian affairs. According to Rysaback-Smith (2015), there are four basic conditions to be applied in humanitarianism. They are: a) humanity, b) neutrality, c) impartiality, and d) operational independence. A strong humanitarianism (*humanitatismi*) demonstrates the importance of collective effort in recovery. The world has recognized that classical humanitarianism evolved as a result of Henry Dunant’s effort related to creating a network of people and organizations across the regions to work for relief activities. Dunant proposed ‘social responsibility’ for relief intervention. These thoughts and practices have improved humanitarian efforts worldwide. In the case of strategizing liberal policies in humanitarian affairs, there needs to be careful planning to meet key liberal values in humanitarianism such as equality and justice at the recipient end.

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has been looking for ways to engage deliberately in humanitarian affairs. The United States, as well as world humanitarian organizations, have entered into bilateral and multilateral aid and donor support for war recovery projects. The United Nations performed as the key world organization on humanitarianism—the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, Kofi Annan, in his report, *The Greater Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All* (2005), emphasized the greater need for international cooperation for war recovery. As a result of a number of policy formulations, the international humanitarian agenda has entered into a larger recognition. The UN system, including its agencies, have

become paramount in practicing humanitarianism. Organizations like the International Red Cross (ICRC) are also exemplary in monitoring the international humanitarian support. However, some failures of the United Nations in their international humanitarian operations, such as in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, enforced them to make some crucial revisions to humanitarian policy priorities. Later global establishments such as ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) and the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) reached broader acceptance and their implementations have enforced the external intervention for peace, development and human rights protection in post-war societies.

The complexity of humanitarian affairs is discussed in a variety of ways. The Cartigny Meeting, known as the War-torn Societies Project (WSP), held in 1994, demonstrated the pragmatic issues affecting international cooperation in the post-war peacebuilding sector. According to the project’s findings, compulsion and the use of force are unavoidable through external involvement in war-affected states. Some argue that the international peacebuilding project following the 9/11 terror attack has changed the peaceful nature of humanitarian intervention. The US-led ‘global war on terrorism’ has transformed external interventions from being naturally peacebuilding to being a forceful mechanism, which in some cases, the impartiality of humanitarian missions is questioned. Criticisms have centred on situations in which liberal values have failed to be achieved through external support due to bias international agenda in some major humanitarian efforts across the world. As Roland Paris (2010) examines, humanitarian efforts have been criticized for tending towards a regime change. Some examples of such changes in the external use of force include Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Syria—humanitarian interventions, therefore, interpreted as cohesive means of external involvement in domestic affairs (Ayoob, 2002). As a result, peace is challenged. Criticisms are also raised against states that fail to achieve sustainable peace through humanitarian achievements. These adverse experiences have a direct impact on evaluating the use of externally-led humanitarian affairs.

India’s Role in Humanitarian Affairs

India’s international peacebuilding efforts historically began with the earliest post-colonial independence of India. As examined by Singh (2017), India’s international peacebuilding strategy is predominantly based on the South-South

Cooperation (SSC) that commenced in the 1950s. Since then, India has been involved in several international and regional aid missions. Among some South Asian regional cooperation efforts, India supported countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. They have received a favourable amount of aid and development assistance from India. It is reported that India has become one of the world's largest non-Western donors, with an average of 12 percent of humanitarian aid going to non-Western countries (Menon, 2010). It is also widely acknowledged that India's current assistance strategy is determined by its strategic factors—making the country a strong international influence. India is strengthening its bilateral relations with developing countries in order to meet their global expectations. Other reasons include India's expansion in the global market and its ability to maintain an economic position in the world. Literature shows that aid and humanitarian expansionism have become an encouraging soft approach to extending bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the rest of the world—India is revitalizing its external policy with a number of critical initiatives at present (Narlikar, 2011; Miller, 2013).

India Strategizing Humanitarianism

India's humanitarian aid policy falls into the soft approach of international cooperation. One of the key characteristics of India's soft approach is that it is based on historically renowned value systems such as *punchseel*, 'non-interference', 'non-alignment', and 'peaceful co-existence' V.K. Krishna Menon, an Indian veteran diplomat and former UN representative, spoke for collective peace. One time, he mentioned that India has chosen world engagements through the direct influence of non-aligned relations. Due to its cooperative gestures, scholarly work has appraised India's potential to be an international humanitarian aid partner (Mohan, 2010). Added to this, T.S. Tirmurthi, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, stated at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting: India is ready for a 'constructive and meaningful' role in the construction of Syria noting India's contribution of US \$ 12 million humanitarian aid, a US \$ 265 million line of credit for industrial sector development, and a gift of US \$ 10 million (UNSC, 2021).

The above claim reflects India's interest in humanitarian engagement in the conflict-affected states. India's humanitarian policy has been consistent with its

vision of cooperation among the global South—which includes the developing region. Taking a step forward, in 2012, the Indian government launched a coordinating and monitoring body for Indian foreign assistance. The Ministry of External Affairs calls this monitoring body the Development Partnership Administration (DPA). Some other institutional initiatives, like the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS) and the Government of India Line of Credit Scheme (LOCs) in 2015, have promoted financial and economic assistance for three categories of states, including highly indebted countries, low-income countries, and middle-income countries (Department of Economic Affairs India, n.d.). In this initiative, Sri Lanka is considered a recipient of development aid as a middle-income state. Sri Lanka became the third largest recipient in the region of India's development assistance. Moreover, India's initiative for the SSC is enacted by the United Nations Office of South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC)—that enables India to reach across the world for humanitarian support. By August 2020, India had contributed US \$ 15.46 million, making this one of the largest non-Western donations offering humanitarian aid and development support to the world.

Is there a 'Look-South' Perspective towards Sri Lanka

This chapter looks into the development in India's relations with regional states. The examination links to India's foreign policy of strategizing its geographical ties with territories around the Indian Ocean. India has paved the way for greater interaction with its southern neighbours, including the two island states of Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Getting closer to these two states is historical, but it is more strategic and economic in modern times to manage the Indian Ocean borders from the influence of great power competition between China and the US. India has diplomatically and strategically expanded relations with several geographical spheres through its foreign policy, such as the 'Look-East' and the 'Look-West' initiatives to protect its hegemonic presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It is well defined and initiated in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy initiatives. Expanding bilateral ties through geographical directions, including East, West, and also one can called 'look-South' by calculating the amount of relations with Sri Lanka and Maldives, is perceived as a strategic foreign policy direction. India's 'Look-East' policy, historically established under Narasimha Rao's government since 1991 shows cooperation with East Asian states, aimed at ending the Cold War. Prime Minister Modi's

government since 2014 has developed ties with the Middle East, Israel, and Iran under the slogan ‘Look West,’ which these two dominant enactments drove India to develop ties with a larger territorial base around India particularly West Asia.

When it comes to the southern borders, India and Sri Lanka remain in long-term relations. Due to India’s geographical proximity and Tamil ethnic affiliation, India has maintained close relations with Sri Lanka from a very long history. The reasons for the two states’ bilateral ties are in the range of political, economic, security, and strategic reasons as well and geographic and many more. The Palk Strait, the shortest distance between India and Sri Lanka, is only 32 kilometres long. Sri Lanka succeeded in demarcating its maritime boundary in the Palk Strait, the Gulf of Mannar, and the Bay of Bengal under the 1974 signing of the ‘Sri Lanka-India Agreement on the Boundary in Historic Waters’, providing the country with legally grounded maritime security. Thus, the economic resources of the two countries are also demarcated. In the early post-colonial period, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized the importance of ‘strategic unity’ in order to strengthen security in the Indian Ocean safe from outside influence (Mehta, 2009)—as a result, India has shown a great interest in Sri Lanka’s domestic political developments and receiving of political ties to shape Indian Ocean stability.

It is also apparent that India’s strategic significance in current day encourages to strengthen the two states’ ties. For many other reasons, India maintains close bilateral relations with Sri Lanka. Trincomalee harbour on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka—naming it as the world’s second deepest natural harbour and the adjacent British-built oil tank farm, has been influential on India. Currently, India is interested in developing the Trincomalee harbour, and with its Cold War experience, Sri Lanka’s friendly relations with the US and Russia have been under India’s watchdog policy. The examination of Jayawardane (1992), stated India’s influence on regional states stemmed from the rivalry between the superpowers during the Cold War, which informed India’s position as a regional power. In addition, the recent Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and Sri Lanka’s close relations with China has increased India’s vigilance about Sri Lanka’s relations with great powers outside the region and Sri Lanka’s direction in ocean politics. It is also noted how India strategizing its affairs—the ‘Sagar Doctrine’ of India places a high value on being a US ally while cooperating and competing with China on maritime borders. India’s anxious presence in the Indian Ocean does have a significant impact on the island nation of Sri Lanka in compelling

for strong bilateral relations (Muni, 2017). The current situation of India's interest in trade and humanitarian development projects with Sri Lanka, therefore, remains within the complex affairs of India-Sri Lanka bilateral relations and strategic interests of the Indian Ocean. Therefore, examining how India's humanitarian affairs became an important engagement in Sri Lanka requires a deeper examination.

India's Humanitarian Affairs in Sri Lanka

During Sri Lanka's civil war and violent armed fights between the GoSL and the LTTE in the 1990s, India was seen as the single most important country in the region by receiving of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees crossing the borders. According to Ghosh (2016), as a result of the violence outbreak of *Black July* in 1983 in Sri Lanka—the clash between Sinhalese and Tamils, the influx of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees to Tamil Nadu in India became a domestic security issue. The Indian government become one of the earliest external party to intervene for a political solution — it has intervened in 1985 bringing the *Thimpu Talks* held in Bhutan and in Indo-Lanka Peace Accord in 1987. President J.R. Jayewardene and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi stepped into the power-devolution as a solution to the Tamil's ethnic problem. Sri Lanka was compelled to undergo constitutional reforms—Thirteenth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution resulted the Provincial Council system in the country. However, India's interest in finding a political solution to Tamil grievances has been heavily criticized in ethnic and political lines. Indian intervention was shown by the entry of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in the Jaffna Peninsula in 1987. According to Chari (1994), the IPKF entry was not purely on supporting the Sri Lankan government on defeating the LTTE but it was due to India's regional security interest— where any security issue adverse to Indian Ocean region and India's security becomes a matter for political involvement, and if necessary, of (even) military intervention from India. Because of such India's political and security interventions to Sri Lanka, the bilateral affairs of the two states became contested during 1990s period.

Due to some political disagreements thereafter, India seemed to be considering a silent role in Sri Lanka's Tamil ethnic problem when Norwegian led peace process was initiated in 2001. India's silence was mainly due to the assassination of India's Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, by an LTTE combatant as a result of India's distancing from solving the Tamil problem. However, India

remained important during and after the civil war due to various other reasons. Since the beginning of the ethnic conflict, India has directly affected by Sri Lankan refugee influx when a large number of Sri Lankan Tamils living in the north fled to Tamil Nadu via sea lanes. Statistics show more than two hundred thousand refugees reside in Tamil Nadu, up to date. It is noted Indian government and the state of Tamil Nadu are expressing their views on Sri Lankan Tamils. When considering reconstitution, India continued its financial support for the rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes in Sri Lanka. When the tsunami struck Sri Lanka in December 2004, the Indian government demonstrated its willingness to provide humanitarian aid — India released a considerable amount of aid and financial assistance for post-tsunami reconstruction in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. It could be noted India's presence in post-war peacebuilding — the two countries' bilateral ties have gradually seemed to be improving in a positive direction through development aid and humanitarian support by altering the view of India in a better way.

India has declared Sri Lanka as a venue where they can aim for unique cooperation. India in number of times, either took a neutral stand or opposed UN Human Rights Council's claims against Sri Lanka's war crimes and human rights violations. India diplomatically intervened in Sri Lanka for their post-war agenda—India's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador K. Nagaraj Naidu, stated India's interest in supporting Sri Lanka at the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (UN-PBC, 2019). The three governments of Sri Lanka that were in power ending the civil war in namely the United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government from 2005 until 2015 led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the National Unity Government (NUG) under President Maithreepala Sirisena during 2015-2019 period, and the *Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* (SLPP) from November 2019 until July 2022 under President Gotabaya Rajapaksa have maintained bilateral relations with India— India became the largest donor for housing reconstruction and resettlement projects especially considering projects in the Northern and the Eastern Provinces. The statistics show Sri Lanka remains the biggest partner of India's donor assistance within South Asian states by accepting a US \$ 350.4 million foreign aid commitment in the year 2017 (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2019). According to data provided by the High Commission of India to Sri Lanka (2020), India has accelerated housing reconstruction and livelihood assistance projects in Northern and Eastern Provinces since 2005, and the government has

committed a total of US \$ 2.6 billion, out of which US \$ 436 million is in grant assistance and US \$ 2.17 billion is listed under the facility called lines of credit, by the year 2020.

India's Involvement in Housing Reconstruction

There are three fold humanitarian affairs that India pays a vital role in Sri Lanka, they are identified in housing reconstruction and rehabilitation and in the voluntary refugee return initiative. These projects have been supported by the Indian government over a period of time also have received a considerable amount of financial support. India has offered funds initially for resettlement of displaced individuals and families in the war affected provinces. India has set aside nearly US \$ 560 million of its total commitments for housing reconstruction. It is reported that a total of 43,800 houses in the two provinces were completed in 2015, and another project for 50,000 houses is underway (High Commission of India, 2020). Some of the housing projects were separately allocated for voluntary refugee returnees repatriating from Tamil Nadu. India's bilateral relief establishes a multilateral forum in Sri Lanka—it collaborates with several international implementing agencies (IAs), including the World Bank, and other organizations such as UN-Habitat and the government's North-East Housing Reconstruction Project (NEHRP), making India's cooperation widely accepted in Sri Lanka's housing reconstruction.

UN-Habitat (n.d.) mentions that the Indian government's housing reconstruction assistance was offered during 'some needy times'. The Indian government's assisted housing projects helped speed up the reconstruction in Sri Lanka by benefiting both Sri Lanka's post-war recovery and tsunami resettlement projects in 2005-2006 period. There were other rehabilitation projects including livelihood development and technical assistance offered by the Indian government—considering development of the Tamil communities.

Voluntary Refugee Returnees

India's assistance to voluntarily returned Tamil refugee returnees from Tamil Nadu remains a vital concern. Sri Lanka has initiated the Tamil refugee returnee program officially in 2009, is supported by both India and the UNHCR. The tripartite agreement, as per statistics, is moving with refugees returning on a voluntary basis for several years by now. The refugee repatriation encounters

political pressure coming from the state of Tamil Nadu to make it as an urgent requirement of the Sri Lankan government. The Tamil Nadu government has mentioned a number of times that it is the Sri Lankan government's duty to recall the refugees and provide them with a safe haven. Tamil Nadu is vigilant about Sri Lanka accepting Tamil refugee returnees in 'good faith' as criticized by Tamil Nadu politics in number of fora. Hence, the voluntary repatriation of Tamil refugees moves not only as a state-to-state initiative but also with a concern of ethnic and political sensitivity. As of July 2015, a total of 7128 refugees out of 102,000 who had left India returned back to Sri Lanka. However, the critics mention that this is not even 10 percent of the total number of 102,000 or many more under reported about how many Sri Lankan Tamils actually live in Tamil Nadu. According to the most recent reports, the year 2018 saw the highest number of voluntary refugee returnees, totalling 1283 (Personal communication, B. Satkunarasa, August 4, 2021).

Despite there is progress in voluntarily refugee repatriation until the global pandemic hits the world in 2020—the refugee returnee initiative has been stopped and slow down periodically. Some observations show Tamil refugees' reluctance to return to their homeland—Sri Lankan Tamil refugees live in Indian soil have already established with the living in India. The reluctance of Tamil refugee return is also due to the financial support they receive from the Indian government— those refugees receive resettlement cash grants under the category of 'social wellbeing assistance'. There are various other social and psychological influences such as Tamil refugees tend to believe that there is no safety, a lack of livelihood opportunities, and also a fear of probable violations of their human rights in Sri Lanka. Despite these issues on the table, the Indian government has collaborated progressively with the reparatory mission of a few hundred Sri Lankan Tamils to be returned. Tamil Nadu state's welfare stand has been reflected in the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee returnee issue, considering it to be a non-forceful attempt. Such deliberations are relevant to the Tamil Nadu government's political stance on refugee reparation. In conclusion, leaving several options for how to manage these humanitarian urgencies reflect the two governments' willingness to collaborate further on.

Conclusion

Since 2009, India's humanitarian affairs have demonstrated for a positive outlook of bilateral cooperation between the two states. While some

humanitarian affairs are carried out for historically valid political and cultural reasons including rehabilitation support, it is clear that the two countries are also developing new forms of cooperation due to trade and strategic importance of the states in the region. As this chapter examines, India's cooperation for international humanitarian endeavours is reflected in Sri Lanka's case study of post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation. The understanding of the India's ties also seeing through its look-South perspective, in which India has key reasons to strengthen ties with island neighbour—Sri Lanka in India's southern arena of its geographic location. This chapter shows how India has increased humanitarian development since the end of Sri Lanka's civil war, making it a new venue for strengthening bilateral ties. India has emphasized unique and flexible humanitarian support which makes Sri Lanka is an exemplary case study.

While examining facts, it could also reveal how India's involvement in the Northern, Eastern, and Uva (plantation) provinces in housing reconstruction is an exercise role that develop Tamil ethnic sentiment. India will continue their assistances to Tamils in Sri Lanka. Despite the fact that the voluntary repatriation of Tamil refugees from Tamil Nadu has been on hold due to the global pandemic outbreak in 2020, the two states are positive about future attempts to increase the number of voluntary refugees' repatriation and give away financial support for the rebuilding of their lives. In conclusion, the chapter considered how India has changed its traditional role of political intervention by making humanitarian affairs a soft tool of bilateralism that is also useful for strengthen India's credible role in its neighbouring Sri Lanka.

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1