



## ARTICLE

# Anticipatory state identity: Understanding the Finnish state's approach to the Arctic

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## Abstract

This paper is an intervention on the understanding of state identity in relation to (anticipatory) changes that have occurred, are taking place, and are expected to happen in the Arctic. Focusing specifically on the Finnish state's approach to the Arctic, we offer the concept of 'anticipatory state identity' in order to comprehend the role of 'anticipation' in developing and projecting a 'state identity.' In so doing, we argue that what drives Finland's vision to project itself to be(come) an 'Arctic state' is fuelled not only by placing a firm foothold in a region of increasing geopolitical importance but also by a consensus among wide-ranging actors in prioritising Finnish Arcticness in its foreign policy. As such, we first shed light on the concept of 'anticipatory state identity.' Then we discuss the global and regional shifts that eventually drove Finland to focus on its Arcticness. Third, we delve into the components and enactments through which Finland projects its Arctic identity. Finally, we conclude that anticipatory state identity bridges the gap between a state's imagination of itself in the future and how such imaginations are materialised and embedded within state policies through a repetitive deployment of narratives and discourses by numerous practitioners in the present. Accordingly, the applicability of the concept moves beyond the Arctic context as it enables reading of (re)forming state identity in line with its anticipatory vision.

## KEYWORDS

anticipatory, Arctic, Arctic strategy, Finland, state, state identity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Until the 1960s, only 20 km north of the city of Helsinki (Finland's capital, located at the southern tip of a country almost 1200 km long) was viewed as the 'wolf limit' (Lähteenmäki, 2017). Such a perception implied that it was wild and untamed countryside just beyond 20 km north of the capital. However, a dramatic shift took place at the turn of the millennium when the entire state of Finland was defined in relation to its northernness as an 'Arctic country' in its entirety, all the way from Helsinki to the land of Santa Claus up in Finnish Lapland. A wide range of state documents, official statements, policies, and texts have been produced that define and therefore identify Finland as an 'Arctic state.'

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When asked ‘Is the whole of Finland, including the South, classified as Arctic?’ Nina Brander, the Secretary-General of the Arctic Advisory Board commissioned by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) of Finland, answered, ‘Yes, Finland is an Arctic country. This is defined in Finland’s Arctic strategy ... This is backed by Finland’s Arctic expertise’ (Finnish Government, 2020, n.p.).

While there is no doubt regarding Finland’s territorial presence in the Arctic—whatever way the ‘Arctic’ is defined, ranging from latitudinal range beyond the Arctic Circle to 10 degrees July isotherm and tree line (Nuttall, 2005)—the quoted statement brings to the fore two significant aspects regarding Finland’s identity as an ‘Arctic state’. First, although Finland has existed as a sovereign state for more than a 100 years, it only started identifying itself as an ‘Arctic country’ at the turn of the millennium (Lähtenmäki, 2017; Väättänen, 2021). Second, the Finnish state’s Arctic identity developed in an anticipatory fashion parallel to numerous geopolitical shifts, environmental changes, and scientific discoveries. Finland is not alone in projecting such a shifting state identity, however. Other states, such as the United States, Canada, Norway, Iceland, and even a few with no territory beyond the Arctic Circle, for instance, China, Japan, and France, have put considerable efforts into developing an Arctic identity for themselves (Bennett, 2015; Dodds & Ingimundarson, 2012; Medby, 2018; Nilsson 2018; Sebastian, 2013; Skripnikova & Raspotnik, 2019; Väättänen & Zimmerbauer, 2020).

This paper is an intervention on the understanding of state identity in relation to (anticipatory) changes that have occurred, are taking place, and might happen in the Arctic. Specifically focusing on Finland, it explores how the category of ‘Arctic state’ is embedded in ‘temporal, spatial, political, affective and everyday contexts’ (Dodds & Ingimundarson, 2012, p. 22). In so doing, we argue that what drives Finland’s vision to project itself to be(come) an ‘Arctic state’ is fuelled not only by efforts to place a firm foothold in a region of increasing geopolitical importance but also by a consensus among wide-ranging actors in prioritising Finnish Arcticness in its foreign policy. In its simplest sense, such a drive is based on the belief that Finland will have opportunities to play a key role in Arctic geopolitics and geoeconomics because of its long history of dealing with cold weather, familiarity with the dark winters, proximity to natural resources, potential new sea-routes through the Arctic, an advanced ice-breaker industry, indigenous population, and Finnish know-how (Finnish Government, 2021b; Lähtenmäki, 2017; PMO, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2017; Väättänen, 2021). Thus, what Ingrid Medby found to be true in the context of Norway could also be applied to Finland: ‘Arctic statehood is tied to political status, leverage, and legitimacy, thereby contributing to a positive self-perception and an advantageous international position’ (Medby, 2015, p. 314). Although the concept of anticipatory state identity can, in general, be applied to analyse how the future figures in state policies, the case of Finland offers a particularly revealing example in a fast-changing geopolitical and geoeconomic context. This is because the connection between anticipation and state identity is explicitly highlighted in Finland’s Arctic strategy through articulations of what and ‘who’ the state is, what it does, and what it can be(come). This strategy has gained increasing significance since its inception in the sense that it lays out a roadmap for the future, which is acted on in the present (cf. Anderson, 2010).

In the following discussion, first, we unpack the concept of ‘anticipatory state identity’ to comprehend the role of ‘anticipation’ in developing and projecting state identity by the Finnish state. Then we shed light on the shifts in the global and regional arenas that eventually drove Finland to focus on its Arcticness. Third, we delve into the components and enactments through which Finland projects its Arctic identity. Finally, in conclusion, by summarising our arguments, we demonstrate the applicability of anticipatory state identity in a broader context.

The empirical foundation for the paper lies in a reading of publicly available texts such as white papers, official reports, policies, speeches, and strategies. We only chose texts that could be associated with the state of Finland in an official manner. Texts were searched with relevant keywords, including, but not limited to, ‘Arctic’, ‘future’, ‘anticipation’, ‘strategy’, ‘country’, and ‘identity’, both in English and Finnish languages. The reading strategy applied in the analysis of such texts and language is based on the above-mentioned observation that an Arctic identity gained traction within Finnish state institutions from the late 1990s because of numerous political, environmental, and economic changes. A special emphasis is put on the way such language and texts are manifested in the documents, their implications for the Arctic region, how Finland positions itself in relation to those, and the strategic courses adopted in anticipation of the changes.

## 2 | ANTICIPATORY STATE IDENTITY

The political importance of anticipation has become an increasingly researched issue in human geography. In particular, the interrelations between future geographies and different forms of anticipatory action, such as pre-emption, precaution, and preparedness, have garnered attention (Adey & Anderson, 2011, 2012; Anderson, 2010). Concurrently, the

Arctic region has been identified as a space of anticipation, specifically manifested in the work of the Arctic Council (Dodds, 2013), as well as in different state-led practices through which the Arctic as a geopolitical space is constituted (Depledge, 2016; Dittmer et al., 2011). The lens of 'anticipatory state identity' continues this emphasis on the political importance of anticipation and draws from two individually applied theoretical interventions in different contexts by merging them to unpack Arctic geopolitics.

Vesa Väättänen (2021), inspired by Mathew Sparke (1998), applied the framework of 'anticipatory geographies' in analysing the Finnish state's position, specifically focusing on its role in being a 'solution provider' and 'territorial node' within the Arctic. Drawing on the cross-border integration of the Cascadia and Transmanche regions, respectively, in North America and Europe, Sparke (1998) demonstrated that cross-border integration and regionalism were generated with the expectations of producing competitive advantages in a de-territorialising global world. The primary vehicle, according to Sparke, in fostering such anticipatory geography was maps, as they facilitated a performative aspect of the anticipation, or in other words, enabled a virtual reality of expectations for the anticipated future (Sparke, 1998). Drawing on this principle, yet moving towards a bridge between geopolitics and geoeconomics, Väättänen (2021) argues that the Finnish state's approach to the changing Arctic remains to be fully materialised. Concurrently, however, the Arctic continues to gain further purchase within the state's foreign and domestic policies as Finland reimagines itself as a key player in the Arctic region in its role as a solution provider and facilitator of flows. Thus, anticipation remains a crucial element in Finland's policies, strategies, and approaches to the Arctic, a state-driven narrative that capitalises on the promises of future economic opportunities with a potential to 'reconfigure spaces and identities' (Szadziwski, 2020, p. 2; Väättänen, 2021).

Medby (2018) proposed and productively applied the concept of 'state identity' in demonstrating how state representatives use language, texts, and discourses to create, develop, and foster an identity for the state. In this sense, identity is understood from the perspective of state elites and their sense of a 'self' of the state that is enacted and iterated on a daily basis (Medby, 2018). As such, 'performativity' of a state identity becomes of crucial significance, which in this case refers to the constitution of a phenomenon through a repetitive deployment of language, discourse, and media as a part of the (everyday) practice of state elites and 'practitioners'. To borrow from Judith Butler, this is 'the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (2011, p. xii). Such self-identity of state elites, however, does not exist without influencing and being influenced by national identity but is not synonymous with it (Medby, 2015). That is, even though state identity may not always necessarily be similar to national identity, it still resonates with the history and geography of the state, as demonstrated by Medby in the contexts of Norway, Canada, and Iceland (Medby, 2014, 2015, 2018). Consequently, Medby contends that Arctic states are yet to become Arctic nations because the sense of Arcticness that is desired by state officials for many reasons may not readily be translated into a sense of belonging among the mass population. Thus, caution must be sought in interchanging the concepts of an Arctic state and an Arctic nation. However, it is also imperative that the construction of Arctic national identity is well underway (Medby, 2014). Therefore, what is at stake regarding state identity, especially in the Arctic, is 'the reification of an idea, of what it means to 'be' and 'represent' an Arctic state, and how this, in turn, may condition what it possibly *can* be' (Medby, 2018, p. 122–23; emphasis in the original).

By drawing on these two approaches, we propose that there is a co-constitutive dynamic between anticipation based on a (projected) future and state identities, which can be fruitfully brought under empirical analysis in the Arctic context, especially because contemporary Arctic affairs are frequently understood in terms of possible future scenarios (Arbo et al., 2013; Bruun & Medby, 2014; Dodds, 2013; Wilson Rowe, 2014). These relations manifest in the following ways. First, state practitioners continuously negotiate and articulate their positions in transforming conditions with reference to the(ir) state's identity. In this sense, state practitioners refer to individuals and groups who bring 'the imagination of the state into being' through everyday acts and actions including, but not limited to, policymakers, political leaders, field-level officials, and different civil society organisations (Ferdoush, 2022, p. 48). Such articulations draw on established state identity discourses concurrently re-contextualising them in relation to projected futures. Second, this identification of 'what', 'who', and 'where' the state presently is becomes a precondition for the state practitioners to plan the measures through which they, and thus the(ir) state, should respond to the projected future(s). For example, that Finland is identified as an Arctic country with a strong political, economic, and environmental role in the region is not merely a statement depicting the current 'state of affairs' but is itself part of anticipatory actions serving to strengthen this role in the future. Third, the articulation of state identity in relation to anticipated futures includes a selection of the future scenarios that should be worked towards or avoided. Therefore, state practitioners identify what the state should become and accordingly an anticipatory state identity is constituted through this process. Consequently, the lens of anticipatory state identity not only facilitates comprehension of what the country *is* but also what it should *be(come)*. Therefore, it becomes an

analytical tool that could be highly productive in our reading of state policies, discourses, texts, and language, which are put into motion, especially in a quickly changing context like the Arctic. The concept of anticipatory state identity thus affords attention to the role of state identities in the process whereby 'futures [are made] known and rendered actionable to thereafter be acted upon' (Anderson, 2010, p. 778). Through these notions, in what follows we thread 'anticipation' and 'state identity' to examine how the Finnish state has been developing its identity as an 'Arctic country' in an anticipatory fashion that took turns with significant geopolitical and geoeconomic events within the Arctic, the EU, and beyond. While it can be argued that any state identity is essentially anticipatory because it is in a constant process of becoming, we contend that anticipatory state identity is markedly different from a mere anticipation of the future. It involves not only active anticipation of future scenarios based on past learnings and information available in the present but also the (re)orienting of the state towards achieving such identity so that, with time, the identity is achieved and acknowledged both in domestic and international scenarios.

### 3 | SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXTS AND THE EVOLVING IDENTITY OF THE FINNISH STATE

Even though state and national identities are not entirely synonymous, as discussed above, the evolution of the ideas concerning the identity of the Finnish state has occurred in tandem with the evolution of national identity discourses. These identity discourses have incorporated explicitly geographical components since before Finnish independence from Russia in 1917: they have been articulated in relation to Sweden in the west and especially Russia in the east. The positioning of Finland as a borderland between the East and the West has been a constituent part in the construction of Finland's territory, which has also entailed the othering of Russia and 'the East' in the construction of Finnish nationhood (Häkli, 1999; Paasi, 1996). This position—a frontier between the West and the East—was prominent, especially until the end of the Cold War, even though echoes of it can still be heard today. The end of the Cold War resulted in a vacuum where the state of Finland reconsidered and reimagined the geographical components of its identity. Finland was, according to Harle and Moisiö, 'seeking its political-geographic location as a 'western outpost', 'borderland', 'satellite', 'non-allied', 'impartial', 'balto-scandic', 'independent', 'northern', and so on, in parallel with the construction of supranational Europe' (Harle & Moisiö, 2000, p. 36; author's translation). This illustrates that the reimagining of the Finnish state within the global arena occurred in an anticipatory fashion and that it cannot be comprehensively grasped without taking the transforming geopolitical conditions into account. It is also indicative of how the future, as seen in the present, is closely related to the past.

The above quotation from Harle and Moisiö suggests that northernness has been a key component in the repositioning of Finland in relation to, and as a part of, Europe. This became increasingly evident since the admission of Finland to the EU in 1995. After this period, the Finnish government, and especially the then prime minister (PM) Paavo Lipponen, actively pursued establishing the Northern Dimension policy for the EU, which became a joint policy for the EU, Russia, Norway, and Iceland in 1999. Even though the emphasis on northernness can, in this context, be tied to the foreign policy pursued by the Finnish government in the post-Cold War geopolitical context, and within the supranational framework of the EU, the emphasis on northernness became particularly complemented by Arcticness after the turn of the millennium:

Many European nations realized around the turn of the millennium that the Arctic Region could well become the continent's most promising object of new investment ... This importance attached to the north was particularly felt to be an opportunity for Finland, which certainly wanted its *fair share* of that region's economic potential, ... Finland aspired to the role of the *leading northern member state*.

(Lähteenmäki, 2017, p. 175; emphasis added)

The excerpt above, from a volume titled *Footprint in the snow: The long history of Arctic Finland*, commissioned by the PM's office of Finland in 2017, clearly demonstrates the shift that took place warranting keen attention from Finland to Arctic affairs. Notably, however, this shift occurred, to some extent, in the late 1980s and early 1990s within the so-called Rovaniemi Process that led to the establishment of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in 1991. The AEPS was the predecessor of the Arctic Council (established in 1996), and all the 'Arctic states' (states with territory north of the Arctic Circle) were involved. At the time, the AEPS offered the Finnish government space to manoeuvre its foreign policy before and when the Soviet Union was beginning to collapse (Keskitalo, 2002).

Even though the Arctic region emerged as an important focus area for Finnish foreign policy through the establishment of the AEPS in the early 1990s, this did not initially involve the articulation of an explicitly Arctic identity for the state. Instead, the initiative was seen as an opportunity for Finland to act as a bridge-builder between the East and the West (Heikkilä, 2019). An Arctic identity was articulated later because of scientific works that revealed the impacts of climate change in the Arctic, and especially due to the economic and political repercussions that these changes were seen to generate (Dittmer et al., 2011). In the next section, we discuss the components of Finland's Arctic identity and how they are related to changes in the Arctic as a political, economic, and environmental region.

#### 4 | COMPONENTS OF FINLAND'S ANTICIPATORY ARCTIC IDENTITY

The Arctic identity of Finland has two key building blocks. First, it draws on and positions Finland in relation to specific understandings of the Arctic region that have been historically constructed and increasingly incorporate projections regarding the future. The second building block is the already established identities that are performatively (re)produced for the Finnish state by its practitioners. The components of Finland's Arctic identity are assembled through an interplay between these building blocks and can be tied to political, economic, and environmental ambitions devised in the present but envisioned for the future.

The Arctic region has been cast as a space of geopolitical anticipation during the past two decades, exacerbated by a growing international interest in the region. The projected geopolitical future of the region has been articulated through interpretations that variably highlight the potential for conflict or cooperation (Dittmer et al., 2011). In Finland's 2021 Arctic strategy document, the geopolitical future of the region is projected as follows:

The more international attention the region receives and the greater the growth in such fields as Arctic maritime traffic or telecommunications are estimated to be in the future, the more interest the region will also attract from the perspectives of security and defence.

(Finnish Government, 2021c, p. 18)

This future projection sets the stage for articulating Finland's political ambitions. In terms of such ambitions, a self-understanding of the Finnish state as a 'bridge-builder' is still prevalent. This was already evident in the context of the AEPS in the early 1990s, but as political interests in the Arctic have grown and are projected to grow in the future, the highlighting of Finland's role as a facilitator of, and a key player in, Arctic cooperation has been accompanied by increasingly assertive articulations of it as an Arctic country. This was put as follows in the 2013 Arctic strategy document:

One of Finland's key objectives is to bolster its position as an Arctic country and to reinforce international Arctic cooperation. Finland is actively involved in multilateral cooperation at the global and regional levels to achieve its own Arctic goals and to pre-empt global threats.

(PMO, 2013, p. 43)

The identification of the whole of Finland as an Arctic country has been evident since the first Arctic strategy document published in 2010, which stated, 'as an Arctic country, Finland is a natural actor in the Arctic Region' (PMO, 2010, p. 7). This has been reiterated through all the updates, including the latest in 2021, where it asserts 'The strategy classifies entire Finland as an Arctic country' (Finnish Government, 2021c, p. 12). That the claims for an Arctic identity for Finland have recently become more vocal reflects the political transformation in which different fora of Arctic cooperation have expanded considerably, and many sets of political relations—such as those between Finland and the EU and between the United States and Russia—have increasingly been tied to this geographical context. In other words, Finland's Arctic identity is, in part, a product of anticipatory thinking (and vision) about the state's role and possibilities in the international context. In addition to political ambitions, the Arctic identity of Finland is connected to economic anticipation.

Economic anticipation in the Arctic has focused on the potential opportunities that environmental transformations (thawing sea ice, for example) offer to different industries, such as shipping, hydrocarbon extraction, and fishing. The 2013 Finnish Arctic strategy exemplifies:

Because of the challenges facing the global economy and the great significance of exports and economic relations to Finland, it is extremely important for Finnish business and industry to seek growth in all areas

where the prospects are favourable, and where Finnish companies have a chance of success. Such prospects are offered by the Arctic region.

(PMO, 2013, p. 26)

The identification of economic opportunities in the Arctic is connected to another way in which the identity of Finland has been articulated recently. During the past decades, consecutive Finnish governments have adopted a neoliberal ethos of international competitiveness as a key governmental problem for the state (see Ahlqvist & Moiso, 2014). This has cemented the understanding that Finland needs to increase its ability to attract different economic flows, such as capital, skilled workers, or tourists, to maintain economic growth while simultaneously promoting Finnish exports in international markets, for instance, through country branding (Kantola & Kananen, 2013). Together, these attempts to promote economic growth have led the Finnish state practitioners to adopt a state identity for Finland—a competitive player in export markets and an attractive territorial node in economic flows (Moiso & Leppänen, 2007). These ideas have become a constituent part of Finland's anticipatory Arctic identity as well (Väättänen, 2021). As put in the 2013 Finnish Arctic strategy:

The Arctic region is undergoing a major transition. Finland possesses the top-level expertise and the know-how it takes to understand, adapt to and even make use of this transition.

(PMO, 2013, p. 17)

With such notions, Finland is positioned as an Arctic expert that can help make use of the economic prospects afforded by climate change. This expertise is tied to Finland's northern location and condition-specific experience. Simultaneously, the northernness of Finland is cast as a competitive advantage in attracting anticipated economic flows of raw materials, goods, investments, and tourists:

Finland will be developed into a node of telecommunications between Europe and Asia, attracting telecommunications and software investment to Finland ... Transport corridors that connect the Arctic regions with Europe and constitute a natural part of the international transport network will be created, strengthening Finland's competitiveness in the global economy.

(PMO, 2017, p. 6)

Intertwined with political and economic ambitions crystallised in the anticipatory Arctic identity for Finland is an increasingly prominent emphasis on climate change and on Finland's role in responding to it. While the previous Arctic strategy documents foregrounded Finland's leading position in environmental expertise and 'sustainable' utilisation of economic opportunities, the 2021 strategy update focuses vividly on casting Finland as a forerunner in climate action. As the Finnish PM Sanna Marin underscored in a speech at the Arctic Frontiers conference in February 2021:

We need long-term thinking. The Arctic is the fastest-warming place on Earth. Finland's national climate targets are ambitious: Finland will be climate neutral by 2035 and climate negative soon after that.

(Finnish Government, 2021a, np)

Even though the effects of climate change in the Arctic have been well known for some time (ACIA, 2005), it is only recently that climate change has emerged as a focal topic in wider international discussions (e.g., the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal) and public consciousness. Therefore, it is deemed significant enough to tie with state identity. The emergence of climate change as a central political issue has induced a race among state practitioners regarding 'their' states' climate neutrality goals—the more ambitious the goals are, the more political leverage they afford. Thus, the emphasis on Finland's ambitious policies regarding climate neutrality in the Arctic context is an articulation of an anticipatory state identity that is expected to yield political influence and new opportunities in 'climate friendly' economic sectors, such as in the utilisation of renewable energies. This anticipatory state identity is hence also manifested in how a 'climate neutral' future is pursued. Put together, the articulation of an anticipatory Arctic identity for Finland in political, economic, and environmental terms illustrates that state identity discourses are mutable and spatiotemporally bound. At the same time, they reflect historical ideas concerning the state in question while simultaneously establishing a future-oriented vision that can be acted on—they are an ensemble of notions regarding what the state is, was, and what it should be(come).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In the context of Finland's Arctic identity, as this paper demonstrates, it is clear that the established conception of Finland as political bridge-builder conditions how its future role and position in Arctic geopolitics are envisioned and articulated. In a similar vein, the economic modes of thinking through which Finland has been cast as a competing and competitive entity throughout the past few decades unquestionably impact how Finland is positioned as an 'Arctic expert' and an attractive territory in the Arctic (Väättänen, 2021). The same also applies to the positioning of Finland as a forerunner in climate action, even though the goals on carbon and 'climate neutrality' on which this identity is built are still a relatively new invention. What threads all these different yet intrinsically connected roles of Finland as a state, we contend, is its positioning as a key player in the Arctic. This positioning illustrates how an Arctic identity has been generated for the state in an anticipatory fashion. Read accordingly, the lens of anticipatory state identity allows an examination of the role of 'anticipation' in a constantly changing Arctic where a projected 'state of affairs [is] yet to be realized' (Väättänen, 2021, p. 7). Consequently, it enhances our analytical capacity in grasping an Arctic 'bazaar' where numerous states, NGOs, supra-state organisations, and actors compete and overlap in staking claims (Depledge & Dodds, 2017).

In line with anti-essentialist approaches in political geography and the wider social sciences, we argue that anticipatory state identity holds significant analytical purchase both as a concept and a lens through which to make sense of the role that future-oriented articulations of state identity play in its policymaking practices. By avoiding a fetishisation of states as actors in their own right, the lens of 'anticipatory state identity' makes it possible to unpack not only how state identities and thus 'states' as specific kinds of (geographical) entities are produced by numerous practitioners (cf. Mitchell, 1991; Medby, 2018; Painter, 2010), but also how the conceptions of these identities condition the practices through which they are produced. Therefore, anticipatory state identity bridges the gap between a state's imagination of itself and how such imaginations are materialised and embedded within state policies through a repetitive deployment of narratives and discourses by numerous practitioners. In so doing, the applicability of the concept (and the lens) moves beyond the Arctic context as it enables reading of (re)forming state identity in line with its anticipatory vision.

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### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available documents. Each of the sources is mentioned in the list of references.

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