



Testimony before the  
U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission

## China's Military and Security Activities Abroad

A statement by

**Chin-Hao Huang**

*Researcher*

SIPRI China and Global Security Program

Room 418, Russell Senate Office Building

Washington, D.C.

March 4, 2009

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**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL  
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

Signalistgatan 9  
SE-169 70 Solna, Sweden  
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00  
Fax: +46 8 655 97 33  
Internet: [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org)

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Chairman Bartholomew, Vice Chairman Wortzel, and distinguished members of the Commission:

I am grateful for the opportunity to testify here today at this important and timely hearing on "China's Military and Security Activities Abroad."

My testimony is divided into three main sections and will attempt to examine with greater granularity China's evolving approach toward peacekeeping activities, its significance as well as the policy implications. First, the testimony will provide a broad overview of the main highlights and recent developments in Chinese peacekeeping activities, especially since the 1990s. Second, it will assess and summarize the current debate and motivations behind China's expanding engagement in UN peacekeeping. Third, the conclusion will address some of the key policy implications and recommendations which emerge from the analysis, with a focus on U.S.-China relations.

**Overview of China's expanding peacekeeping engagement**

In the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–53), during which Chinese forces encountered and fought the United States-led UN Command, China held an antagonistic position toward UN operations, often viewing them with

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Bates Gill and Chin-hao Huang, "China's Expanding Peacekeeping Role: Its Significance and Policy Implications," SIPRI Policy Brief, February 2009, available at

<http://www.sipri.org/contents/editors/PB0203>; and a paper delivered at the conference

"PLA Missions Beyond Taiwan," Carlisle, PA, September 2008.

The author ([huang@sipri.org](mailto:huang@sipri.org)) can be reached via his email.

skepticism and questioning their legitimacy. This cautious approach continued even after the admission of the People's Republic of China to the UN in 1971, when China for many years refrained from playing a significant role in UN Security Council's debates on peacekeeping. China cast its first vote on peacekeeping in 1981, when it voted to authorize the extension of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). In 1982, China made its first financial contribution toward UN peacekeeping operations.

China's contributions were first seen in the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in 1989 where Chinese military personnel were dispatched to help monitor elections in Namibia. This was followed by the deployment of five Chinese military observers to support the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East. Shortly after these initial, limited contributions, China sent its first military units—two separate deployments of 400 engineering troops each, accompanied by 48 military observers—to Cambodia over an 18-month period from 1992 to 1993.

Over the last twenty years, China's contributions to UN peacekeeping activities have steadily increased and diversified (see figure 1), especially since the late-1990s. Today, it is the fourteenth largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, ahead of three other permanent members of the UN Security Council—Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As of December 2008, China was the thirteenth biggest contributor of civilian police to UN peacekeeping operations. China first sent police in 1999 to serve in the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). In 2004, in spite of the absence of formal diplomatic recognition between Beijing and Port-au-Prince, China dispatched formed police units (FPU) to support the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), helping to maintain law and order and train local police.

A number of recent developments indicate that the debate on this more active approach toward peacekeeping is intensifying in China among policy elites. In June 2007 the PLA convened the first major internal meeting on peacekeeping, where senior representatives of the PLA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Public Security gathered to discuss ways to further streamline and improve the selection, organization, training and rotation of Chinese peacekeepers. Lieutenant General Zhang Qinsheng, deputy chief of the General Staff of the PLA, was subsequently quoted in the Chinese press that the meeting helped gather further insights “to raise the peacekeeping capabilities of China's armed forces...and [to] gradually expand peacekeeping exchanges and cooperation with the outside world in a planned and focused manner.”<sup>1</sup> Mindful of the continued challenges China faces in its peacekeeping capabilities, Zhang also commented that China “must vigorously

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<sup>1</sup> “Chinese Deputy Military Chief on Raising Army's Peacekeeping Role,” *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, June 22, 2007, translated in BBC Monitoring International Reports: CPP20070622968151.

strengthen building of the peacekeeping ranks and forge a high-caliber peacekeeping contingent.”

At a separate seminar organized by the PLA National Defense University in 2007, senior military officers also called for greater Chinese participation in peacekeeping operations, rescue and relief tasks, counterterrorism exercises, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The PLA’s expanding presence abroad has in turn prompted some Chinese academics to call for a clearer legislative basis to govern such activities.<sup>2</sup>

China is also gradually building its overall peacekeeping capacity. The Civilian Peacekeeping Police Training Centre in Langfang was established in 2000, joining the International Relations Academy in Nanjing as a locale for training Chinese peacekeepers. In addition, Chinese officials expect that a new peacekeeping training centre in Huairou will become operational during 2009 to help the PLA’s Peacekeeping Affairs Office centralize and better coordinate Chinese peacekeeping activities.

Broadly speaking, beyond simple ‘boots on the ground,’ China has also exhibited greater commitment to peacekeeping activities by increasing the number of Chinese administrative and leadership personnel involved in UN peacekeeping and by placing its troops in increasingly challenging environments. In August 2007, General Zhao Jingmin was appointed as the force commander of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the first time that a Chinese national had held such a position. More recently China has adopted a more active approach on sensitive issues. In the case of Darfur, it has recognized the need for political reconciliation and a hybrid African Union–United Nations peacekeeping force to address the humanitarian crisis. In July 2008 China deployed an additional 172-member engineering battalion to Darfur, bringing its contributions to a total of 321 troops in order to help prepare the way for the larger UN force envisioned by the international community.

### **Key factors shaping China’s evolving approach**

Three interrelated factors appear to motivate the new, proactive approach of the PLA and the Chinese leadership to peacekeeping. First, the trend in peacekeeping contributions reflects China’s overall effort, especially since the late 1990s, to become more responsive to international expectations while making positive and tangible contributions to global peace and security. At the Munich Security Conference in 2007 a senior Chinese official opined, “China’s increasing involvement in UN peacekeeping missions reflected China’s commitment to contribute to global security given the country’s important role

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<sup>2</sup> “Speeding up Legislation on PLA’s Non-war Military Actions,” Jiefangjun Bao Online, October 28, 2008, translated in Open Source Center: CPP20081028710005.

within the international system and the fact that its security and development are closely linked to that of the rest of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Simply put, positive engagement with the outside world helps China to project a more benign and ‘harmonious’ image beyond its borders, to reassure neighbours about its peaceful intentions, and to softly balance U.S. and Western influence while gradually but more firmly establishing China’s acceptance as a great power.<sup>4</sup>

Second, China’s stepped-up peacekeeping activity puts into action calls by Chinese President Hu Jintao for the PLA to perform ‘new historic missions’ in the 21st century. It also parallels the PLA’s growing interest in expanding its non-combat missions or ‘military operations other than war’ (MOOTW)—such as counter-piracy, disaster response and humanitarian relief—both in China and abroad.<sup>5</sup> The deployment in December 2008 of three Chinese naval vessels to help protect Chinese merchant shipping off the coast of Somalia is just the most recent step along this decade-long path.

Third, it also appears that participation in peacekeeping activities abroad carries important military applications and lessons for the PLA, a concept embedded in the 2008 Chinese Defence White Paper. According to the White Paper, over the past 20 years more than 11,000 Chinese individual peacekeepers have been deployed to 18 UN operations. These contributions, including repeated deployments of engineering battalions and formed police units, have provided practical experience for Chinese security forces and have helped improve their responsiveness, riot-control capabilities, coordination of military emergency command systems and ability to conduct MOOTW at home. These benefits will be reinforced if, as expected, Chinese forces increasingly take on missions with more robust mandates as part of their expanded peacekeeping activities.<sup>6</sup>

### **Policy implications and recommendations**

Several important considerations can be gleaned from this brief analysis. On the whole, China’s expanding engagement in peacekeeping activities offers new

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<sup>3</sup> “China bolsters peacekeeping commitment,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, February 21, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: “PLA Must Improve Capabilities, Safeguard Party’s ‘Ruling Status’ in New Era,” *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, October 20, 2007, translated in Open Source Center: CPP20080618436001; Du Nongyi, “Peacekeeping Diplomacy: Main Theme of Military Diplomacy in the New Phase of the New Century,” *Military Science*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2007).

<sup>5</sup> James Mulvenon, “Chairman Hu and the PLA’s ‘New Historic Missions,’” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 27; and Cynthia Watson, “The Chinese Armed Forces and Non-Traditional Missions: A Growing Tool of Statecraft,” *China Brief*, vol. 9, no. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Roy Kamphausen, “PLA Power Projection: Current Realities and Emerging Trends,” in Michael Swaine, et al, eds, *Assessing the Threat: The Chinese Military and Taiwan’s Security* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).

opportunities to strengthen its commitment to regional stability and security building and to improve international peacekeeping capacity. It also opens potentially beneficial areas of constructive military cooperation between the United States and China as the two countries seek to work together in areas of converging interest.

While China is keen to sharply increase its peacekeeping activities, it will do so on a case-by-case basis and subject to certain persistent limitations. On the one hand, China's increasing commitment to UN peacekeeping activities opens a new avenue for engagement with the international community and offers an opportunity to deepen China's commitment to global norms of confidence- and security-building measures, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction. The continued deployment and redeployment of Chinese units throughout Africa, for example, suggests a gradual accrual of operational knowledge and a better understanding of the political and security dynamics and complexities on the ground.

Likewise, China's increasing interaction with other militaries in UN peace operations has, to a certain degree, also opened the window for a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of China's peacekeeping capabilities. Generally speaking, it appears that China is prepared to shoulder greater responsibilities and to play a more significant role in supporting the UN peacekeeping system. This would be welcomed within the UN system as the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) continues to rely on contributions and support from such developing countries as China. This is only likely to increase as the demand for and demands on peacekeeping operations are widely expected to rise in the coming years.<sup>7</sup>

However, China's willingness to fully engage in UN peacekeeping operations will face a number of constraints. Expectations within the international community should thus be modest but cautiously optimistic. The traditional view of state sovereignty and non-interference will continue to be the most important concern for Chinese policymakers. Practical matters of political, military and bureaucratic will and capacity will slow China's responsiveness in peacekeeping affairs. For example, China has not yet provided its planning data sheet to the UN Standby Arrangements System (UNSAS), which would list, among other things, major equipment, unit organization and movement data. In addition, China has yet to provide a formal commitment to contribute standby troops to the UN under the standard response time frame. In private, Chinese experts explain that there is a perennial shortage of well-trained peacekeeping officers with the necessary language and technical skills in the PLA. Insufficient air- and sealift capacity has also inhibited China's ability to

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<sup>7</sup> "Press Release for the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations: 206<sup>th</sup> and 207<sup>th</sup> Meetings," UN Department of Public Information, February 23, 2009, accessed at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2009/gapk199.doc.htm>.

commit to the rapid deployment of significant numbers of troops over long distances. Moreover, China's financial contribution to UN peacekeeping operations hovers at around 2 per cent of the overall DPKO budget. This contribution would need to increase if China wants to play a larger role commensurate with its status as a permanent member of the Security Council and a rising global power.

China remains generally cautious toward the use of peacekeepers and on the broader issue of intervention by the international community. In such cases as Zimbabwe and Burma, China has thus far resisted calls from human rights advocacy groups and some Western governments to pursue intervention based on humanitarian justifications. It should be noted, however, that in 1999 China accepted a UN-sanctioned humanitarian justification for using force in East Timor. It also subsequently dispatched a civilian police contingent to support the mission there. Likewise, in 2003, in response to growing instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, then-Chinese Ambassador to the UN, Zhang Yishan, argued that the UN should intervene in conflict areas earlier, faster and more forcefully. As such, China will continue to review interventions on a case-by-case basis. There will be limits to its participation, and it is unlikely that China will offer active support to international intervention when the international community is divided and the intended host government is opposed.

Over time, it is possible that China will aim to gradually counterbalance U.S. influence and more actively shape—in ways consistent with Chinese foreign policy principles and national interests—the norms guiding UN peacekeeping operations. Such influence could accrue over time, but it would first require more substantive Chinese commitment in several key areas, including better-trained troops and a more capable military that can deploy effective rapid-response teams. While Chinese troop contributions have increased rapidly since the mid-1990s (see figure 2), Chinese peacekeepers operate mainly on the margins. The Chinese Government still needs to focus on improving the quality of its peacekeeping troops and expand its contributions beyond maintenance, engineering and medical units. It also needs to demonstrate leadership capabilities at the DPKO and in peacekeeping operations around the world and to provide a greater financial contribution.

In light of these developments, peacekeeping remains a topical and important issue area for cooperation between Washington and Beijing. There has been some thinking in this direction. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen indicated in a speech in Beijing in 2000: “U.S. and Chinese service members may one day find themselves working side by side in peacekeeping missions.”<sup>8</sup> More recently at a track-1.5 dialogue on U.S.-China security issues, former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry also suggested that the two

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<sup>8</sup> “Chinese Military Students, Family Member Query Cohen,” U.S. Department of Defense, July 14, 2000, accessed at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=45322>.

armed forces should cooperate more closely on humanitarian operations and peacekeeping missions.<sup>9</sup>

Working on peacekeeping training activities and capacity-building thus provide a useful platform to build confidence and greater understanding between the two militaries. The United States is in the midst of an expansive phase on peacekeeping training and capacity-building engagements with foreign militaries, with the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) as a flagship initiative in this regard. In 2004, in response to the Group of Eight (G8) Summit agreement to address the continued shortage of available peacekeepers, then-U.S. President George W. Bush announced the establishment of GPOI, a five-year program managed by the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs to enhance peacekeeping training for UN missions as well as partner countries' overall peacekeeping capacity-building. The goal is to train as many as 75,000 military peacekeepers by 2010, mostly in Africa. There is an emerging interest at the policy-making level within the State Department to explore future prospects for working with China to help build African peacekeeping capacity. This would include, for example, working with Chinese contractors and drawing on Chinese assistance in infrastructure support in the initial build-up stage of peace operations.

While Africa remains a focal point in the program, GPOI's outreach includes all the major regions around the world. In the Asia-Pacific front, for example, GPOI programs include: Cobra Gold Exercise; train-the-trainers (TTT); command post, military exercise; and field training military exercise (FTX). The latter two exercises have been largely integrated into the multinational Khan Quest Exercises based in Mongolia. These exercises follow most of the UN standard peace support operations' training, techniques, and procedures, and have sought to enhance multinational interoperability, expand confidence-building and military-to-military relationships, and simulate multinational cooperation experienced in UN peacekeeping missions. Since China is not a GPOI partner country, however, it has only taken part in the Cobra Gold and Khan Quest exercises as an observer on the margins.

To be sure, the prospects for U.S.-China collaboration on peacekeeping activities also face considerable obstacles at this stage. The Congressionally mandated restrictions on U.S.-China military-to-military ties outlined in the Defense Authorization Bill for fiscal year 2000 places strict limitations on the scope and scale of bilateral military exchanges, which includes advanced combined-arms and joint combat operations, advanced logistical operations, surveillance and reconnaissance operations, and force projection operations,

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<sup>9</sup> "China, U.S. armed forces vow to enhance cooperation," Xinhuanet, June 30, 2008, accessed at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-06/30/content\\_8466881.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-06/30/content_8466881.htm).



among many other areas.<sup>10</sup> Official exchanges on peacekeeping training and coordination between the two sides are not explicitly restricted in the bill, but it will require strong political will at the senior policymaking level to make the case that such interactions with the PLA do not pose a threat to U.S. national security. Absent strong political will, and as long as the limitations remain the law of the land, there will be continued caution in the level of interaction between the two militaries. This is especially true as long as concerns remain about the opacity of China's longer-term military intentions and how they contrast with U.S. regional and global security interests.

The Defense Department's Quadrennial Defense Review expresses concerns about the pace, scope, and future direction of China's military modernization effort. But, on the other hand, the report also recommends military exchanges, visits, and other forms of engagement as useful tools in promoting transparency as long as they bear substance and are fully reciprocal. It further identifies that regularized exchanges and contacts have the significant benefit of building confidence, reducing the possibility of accidents and other unintended confrontations, and providing lines of communication that are essential for the two militaries.<sup>11</sup>

Looking ahead, as the new U.S. administration seeks to build a productive relationship with Beijing, Washington should consider policies aimed at reinforcing some of the encouraging trends related to China's expanding involvement in multilateral peace operations. China's deployment of naval vessels off the coast of Somalia, for example, was closely coordinated with African and Western partners and has been warmly received by NATO, the European Union, and the United States. In that light, Washington should take the lead to sustain closer dialogue and policy coordination with China on other mutual security concerns—such as a more robust level of assistance for forces in Afghanistan—and at a higher diplomatic level, in order to enlist greater support from the Chinese. In recent years, China's interest in taking part in peacekeeping operations in East Timor, Haiti, and Darfur all point to a more flexible view of intervention. When there is broad international consensus around a specific intervention, China has tended to lend its support (rather than be viewed as an outlier on these critical, global issues).

Moreover, Washington should also work with Western countries with substantial interests in peacekeeping affairs to increase cooperation with China in peacekeeping seminars, training courses and other capacity-building programs. They should also explore concrete ways in which China could play a more active part in planning, coordination and leadership roles at the DPKO

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<sup>10</sup> See Kenneth Allen, "U.S.-China Military Relations: Not a One-Way Street," Henry L. Stimson Center News Advisory, December 13, 1999, accessed at <http://www.stimson.org/?SN=ME20011221208>.

<sup>11</sup> "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," U.S. Department of Defense, February 6, 2006, accessed at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/QDR20060203.pdf>.

and to increase its financial contributions. In the long run, collaboration on peacekeeping and other related forms of military-to-military exchange would also contribute to building greater openness and transparency within the PLA.

The expansion in Chinese engagement in peacekeeping provides an important and widening window of opportunity for the United States to engage with China more closely on peacekeeping-related issues in order to strengthen China's commitment to global stability, ensure greater convergence between Chinese and other international interests on questions of regional security, and encourage more effective international peacekeeping operations.

I thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Commission today, and look forward to further discussion of these topics.

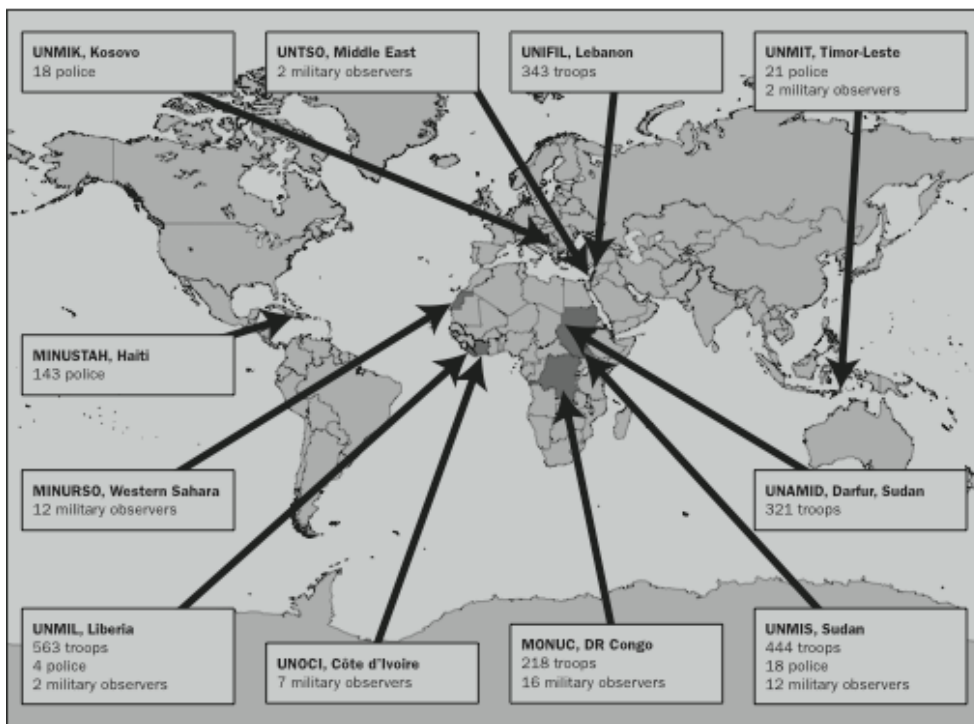


Figure 1. Type, number and location of Chinese personnel contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, December 2008  
 Source: UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, “UN Mission’s Summary Detailed by Country,” December 31, 2008, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/>.

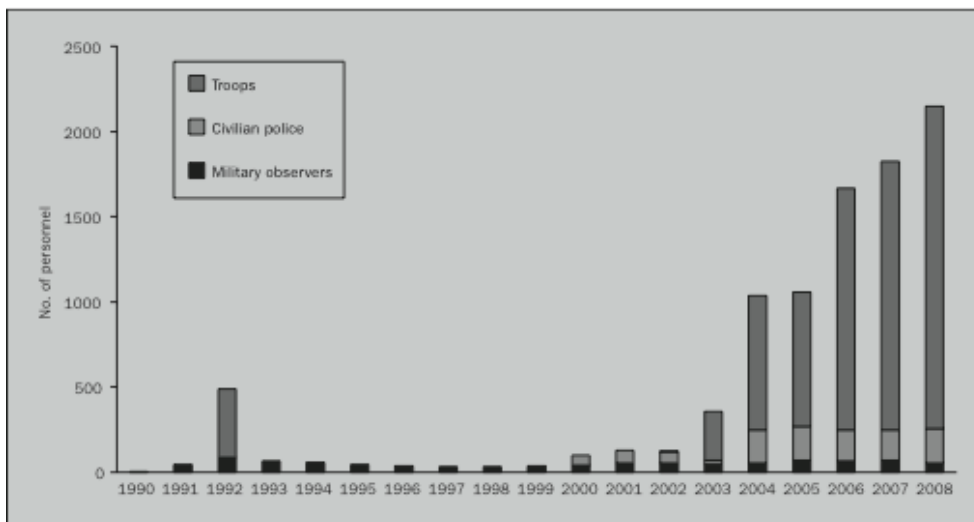


Figure 2. Chinese troop contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, 1990-2008  
 Sources: SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, <http://conflict.sipri.org>; and UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, “UN Mission’s Summary Detailed by Country,” <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/>.

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