



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 58

July 2015

China's Response To HADR Missions



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China's role in providing emergency aid and assistance to neighbouring Nepal during the April 25, 2015 earthquake invited considerable attention from the international community. It also flagged China's capability to project soft power, a major component of its foreign policy, in showcasing it as a responsible power in the comity of nations. Ever since Hu Jintao announced the "Four Historic Missions" for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 2004, China, has taken great strides in fulfilling the fourth of the "Historic Missions"—help maintain world peace¹—by venturing beyond its borders on Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) missions in recent years. MOOTW missions abroad include peacekeeping, anti-piracy, Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR), etc. For any nation, they aim to further foreign policy objectives. In China's context, they also facilitate China's aspirations to project itself as an emerging yet benign superpower and mitigate concerns about the 'China threat'. HADR are normally undertaken in two ways; one, providing emergency relief by way of financial aid and search and rescue teams, and; two, providing financial aid and infrastructure support for reconstruction and rehabilitation. This paper aims at analysing China's contribution to emergency relief in HADR missions abroad

Key Points

1. Other than furtherance of its foreign policy objectives, China's response in HADR missions is also aimed at projecting a benign image and allaying fears of a 'China threat'.
2. In the last decade, China's contribution to HADR missions globally has been governed by nationalist and jingoistic considerations. Its response has been tempered by loss of life and damage to the Chinese diaspora rather than humanitarian considerations.
3. China tends to tighten its purse strings where immediate relief is concerned and prefers to contribute to rehabilitation and reconstruction, which has a greater foreign policy impact.
4. China's response to the Nepal earthquake was not commensurate with its stature as a responsible neighbour or an emerging global power. Even the US, which has less stakes in the region, contributed more. The evacuation of the Chinese diaspora from Nepal was tardy and earned the wrath of the social media at home.
5. China is yet to make a global impact as a responsible and emerging superpower.

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during the last decade and to infer if China and the PLA have achieved the capabilities to implement the country's soft power objectives as a responsible and emerging global power.

HADR Missions in Last Decade

China's record of assisting nations in HADR in the last decade has not been commensurate with its international standing. Even as it aspires to be an emerging superpower, it has kept its purse strings tight in matters of provision of aid and assistance.

In the case of the tsunami that struck Aceh in neighbouring Indonesia in 2004, aid and contributions totalling US\$ 6.7 billion were received from donors worldwide. Surprisingly, China did not figure anywhere in the list of the top 10 donors.² China's contribution was goods worth a paltry US\$ 600,000 through the Chinese Embassy in Indonesia and US\$ 200,000 from Chinese private companies. In addition, it sent three medical teams of 35 persons each for emergency assistance.³ Compare this with US\$ 15 million from the US to Indonesia alone, besides, direct assistance from the carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* which docked at Banda Aceh. Much later, in 2007, China contributed US\$ 2.13 million as part of reconstruction through the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the form of medical equipment, including 15 ambulances, 10 cooling containers for blood preservation and 10 operating suits, as well as X-ray, ultrasonography and electrocardiogram units.⁴ As part of the reconstruction process, it constructed a model village, also locally called "Jackie Chan village" which rehabilitated 2,400 people of diverse ethnicities that included about 100 Chinese households, as well as Acehnese, mixed Acehnese-Javanese, and other ethnicities.⁵

When a devastating earthquake struck Haiti in 2010, China contributed US\$ 1million immediately and rushed a 60-member emergency rescue team despite having no diplomatic relations with Haiti. This action was prompted more by the compulsion of providing assistance to the 125-member PLA contingent at Haiti deployed under the UN, whose eight troopers were buried alive in the earthquake.⁶ The team included search and rescue personnel and doctors, three sniffer

dogs and 10 tonnes of food, equipment and medicine on the special plane. "We take limited equipment and personnel due to time deadline, limited capacity of transportation and long-distance," said Dr Hou Shike, head of the medical group.⁷ Clearly China was not prepared to handle such obligations globally because of limited capacity to project soft power on the other side of the globe. The focus of the rescue team was largely to assist its own contingent as well as 'be seen' to be doing enough for the consumption of the domestic audience.

Even during the floods that devastated Pakistan in 2010, China's contribution to its "all weather friend" was a measly 1.19 per cent of the total international aid. The US led the rankings with US\$ 377 million (24.74 per cent), with China at US\$ 18 million at a distant 13th.⁸ In an official statement, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN said that the People's Republic of China (PRC) had provided immediate financial aid of Yuan 120 million (US\$ 18 million) and pledged a further Yuan 200 million subsequently, thus, totalling Yuan 320 million (US\$ 48 million) besides two medical and rescue teams totalling 118 personnel.⁹ In comparison, the US government provided US\$ 390 million and the US Central Command (CENTCOM) provided C-130 Hercules planes, 26 helicopters, 600 service personnel and airlifted 20 million pounds of relief (approximately 9,000 tonnes).¹⁰ Even India provided US\$ 25 million in aid to Pakistan.¹¹

Cambodia, China's southern neighbour, was devastated by floods in 2011 and again in 2013. In 2011, China provided emergency relief aid which included "30 types of medications, medical supplies and equipment, mosquito nets, blankets, towels and other relief materials" and financial assistance totalling US\$ 7.87 million.¹² In 2013, the floods were less severe although 1.7 million people were affected and as many as 144,000 required evacuation. China responded by donating US\$ 1million through the Red Cross which was used for purchasing 2,000 tonnes of milled rice for the vulnerable people in the country.¹³

When Typhoon Haiyan struck the Phillipines in 2013, China was not only slow to respond but announced aid of US\$ 2 million, even less than the US\$ 2.7 million

announced by the private company IKEA, earning both scorn and ridicule worldwide.¹⁴ Apparently, China's decision was motivated more by political compulsions rather than international obligations, prompting Zheng Yongnian, a China politics expert at the National University of Singapore, to state that "China has missed an excellent opportunity to show itself as a responsible power and to generate goodwill....They still lack strategic thinking."¹⁵ Zhu Feng, an international relations expert at Peking University, was quoted as saying that the amount donated "reflects the political deadlock, if not outright hostility, between the two countries. The political atmosphere is the biggest influence."¹⁶ On the other hand, the US responded with US\$ 28 million and a task force of 1,000 soldiers on board the aircraft carrier USS *George Washington*, along with planes and helicopters to ferry supplies and rescue survivors.

When an earthquake and a tsunami devastated Japan in 2011, China responded with caution. The Chinese government pledged Yuan 30 million (US\$ 4.5 million) in humanitarian assistance, 10,000 tonnes of gasoline and 10,000 tonnes of diesel. In addition, the Red Cross Society of China also offered a total of Yuan 26 million to Japan. Although China announced concern and solidarity with the Japanese people, essentially for its domestic audience, the number of rescue team members dispatched – only 15 – was not exactly worthy of note (in contrast, Australia sent a 76-member rescue team, Britain a 70-member unit, France a 134-member team, and Taiwan sent 28 people).¹⁷

China's response to the search and rescue of the flight MH-370 which went missing on March 08, 2014, was impressive. China deployed ships and aircraft for Search and Rescue (SAR) incrementally and by May 01 had deployed 18 naval ships, 13 search planes and 21 satellites to cover an area of 1.4 million sq km, "the largest scale operation of search and rescue by China in history."¹⁸ This was quite natural because as many as 152 out of the total 239 persons on board who went missing were Chinese nationals. Wary of domestic reaction and ridicule after the Typhoon Haiyan experience, the Chinese media went on an overdrive terming the rescue effort a "national heroic effort". The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) dispatched IL-76

aircraft to Perth, Australia, to participate in the SAR operations as a display of its concern amidst huge publicity even though the planes have no particular SAR capability or equipment. Xinhua, the official news agency stated that the plane's windows give them "a very good visual search capacity."¹⁹

The response to the disappearance and subsequent salvage of Air Asia flight QZ 8501 in the Java Sea in December 2014 was a contrast. The flight, with 162 persons on board, which was on its way from Surabaya in Indonesia to Singapore, crashed, and was discovered by the Indonesian Navy off the Java coast a few days later. The search was joined by nine ships from four countries in which China sent just one, the *Yongxingdao*, a PLA Navy (PLAN) vessel equipped with underwater search and detect devices and 48 divers.²⁰ "We will mainly provide data analysis, search guidance, as well as intelligence support and relevant personnel who can help with decision-making," said Yin Jie, Director of the China Maritime Search and Rescue Centre.²¹ There were no Chinese nationals on board.

China's Response to Nepal Earthquake

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25, 2015, caused major devastation in the country. It also caused loss of life and damage to property in Tibet as well as in India. Both nations responded to the disaster with haste and urgency. It is not the intent here to compare the responses of both nations nor raise the issue of one upmanship but to analyse China's response as compared to other HADR emergencies in the past.

The PLA sent a total of 1,088 military and paramilitary personnel to Nepal claiming it to be the "biggest group the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and armed police forces have sent to foreign soil for humanitarian aid missions since New China was founded in 1949."²² Of these, at least 500 men of the People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) were tasked to clear the Nepalese section of the 943-km road connecting Kathmandu to Lhasa in the Chinese controlled region of Tibet, according to the official Xinhua News Agency. They also repaired a 114-

km section of the China-Nepal Highway that links Kathmandu with the border pass of Zham.²³

The PLA sent an international rescue team belonging to an Engineer Regiment of the 38th Group Army of Beijing Military Area Command (MAC), a General Hospital of the PAPF by PLAAF IL-76 aircraft, another rescue team manned by the Engineer Regiment of the 14th Group Army and a medical team manned by the General Hospital and the Disease Control Centre of the Chengdu MAC, totalling 222 officers and soldiers to Nepal. The RMB 10 million emergency disaster relief aid materials, including tents, medicines and water purification equipment, were mobilised and deliveries commenced from May 01 onwards, almost a week after the disaster.²⁴ In the first week after the disaster, the PLA had flown 10 sorties of the IL-76 and 18 sorties of helicopters, rescued two people, provided medical treatment for 391 people, decontaminated an area of 30,000 square metres, airlifted 260 wounded or trapped people, and transported 289 tonnes of relief material by air. In reality, however, the PLAAF put into service four IL-76 of the PLAAF and three Mi-17 helicopters of the Aviation Brigade of Chengdu MAC. These aircraft were used only to ferry supplies and not evacuate affected persons.

There was considerable annoyance in China over the slow process of airlifting of Chinese tourists as well as workers employed in various Beijing-funded projects by military aircraft in contrast to the Indian Air Force. China outsourced this task in Nepal to a number of Chinese civilian airlines. There were also reports of some airline companies demanding heavy fares, but these were subsequently denied. Defending the move to use civilian aircraft, Chinese defence spokesman Geng Yansheng said, "Whether to use military aircraft to transport people from a disaster area – this is to be decided by various factors."²⁵ In an editorial in Xinhua, it was claimed that "passengers can board Chinese planes in Kathmandu with or without a plane ticket as long as they have Chinese passports." It concluded by saying, "In a time of need, the Chinese passport demonstrates worth." This was not entirely true. Social media "buzzed with conflicting reports that included price gouging and inability to access the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu." Ultimately,

the Chinese Foreign Ministry officially disputed the Xinhua report, which was deleted.²⁶ Again, when aftershocks struck Nepal on May 05, the same fleet of helicopters was pressed into service to ferry supplies and evacuate people from affected villages on the border with China. "Prior to Tuesday's powerful quake, the Chinese helicopter fleet was primarily responsible for relief supplies delivery, while after the quake, evacuating personnel, both victims and aid workers, became another primary task", said, Yang Lei, Commander of the Aviation Brigade.²⁷ Clearly, the focus of evacuation was limited to the villages bordering Tibet.

China provided RMB 10 million as emergency disaster relief aid to Nepal. Subsequently, China earmarked two rounds of humanitarian aid worth Yuan 60 million (US\$ 9.7 million).²⁸ The Ministry of Commerce also announced that meat reserves placed in Tibet would be made available to Nepal, bordering the Chinese region affected by the quake. These included 100 tonnes of yak meat and 100 tonnes of pork.²⁹ China also airlifted a total of 546 tonnes of relief material, including 1,600 tents, 10,000 blankets and 327 electric generators to the quake-hit areas, according to Vice Minister of Commerce Qian Keming.³⁰

The US response by the Pacific Command (PACOM) was rapid and in fair measure. US assets were not in close proximity to Nepal, yet Task Force 505, which coordinated US military relief included three Marine Corps UH-1Y Huey helicopters, four Marine Corps MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, four Air Force C-17 Globemaster III transports and two Marine Corps KC-130 Hercules aircraft, as well as various ground and aviation command and control capabilities. In addition, it was anticipated that at least 500 US military personnel would be working on relief efforts in Nepal.³¹ The US also provided financial support of US\$ 14.2 million, prompting Xinhua to note, somewhat cynically, that the US contribution was "a somewhat petty contribution compared with the large amount of aid and relief materials it had provided for its strategic partners in Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines."³²

Analysis of Chinese Response

There is a clear pattern in China's policy on response to HADR missions. To nations that do not figure in China's strategic calculus or with which China's relations are strained, it has preferred to provide monetary assistance. The quantity of financial aid has, at times been measly, disproportionate to its aspiration to be the world's leading economic power by 2016-17. This was evident in its support to Japan during the tsunami or the tsunami-cum-earthquake disaster in Aceh in Indonesia or even Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. Even the assistance to Pakistan in 2010, then a US satellite nation, was measured and limited. In fact, to such nations, China has preferred to provide financial aid through the UN and Red Cross in an attempt to portray its international obligations as a responsible nation. But where national interests are involved, especially affecting the Chinese diaspora or citizens, China has responded comprehensively, employing both financial as well as military resources. In Haiti, where China lost members of its UN contingent, in the MH-370 search where the largest number of passengers were Chinese, or even in Cambodia, where China has huge political and economic interests, the response was coordinated, comprehensive and "large hearted".

It is in China's response in Nepal that a shift in its policy has become evident. China has been wooing Nepal in recent years to checkmate the threat to its

weak underbelly, Tibet, through Nepal. Besides, Nepal is a gateway to South Asia. Although, China attempted to respond comprehensively, the quantum of response and the capability to respond have both been questionable. Despite being a neighbour, its ability to react across the Himalayas, particularly after the Sino-Nepal Friendship Highway was blocked, was tardy. Even the evacuation and supplies were restricted to villages close to the Tibet border and not the heartland where the loss has been incalculable. In comparison to the US response, China has been unable to mobilise assets in time and numbers adequately, an indication that it still has a long way to go to build capability and capacities to project soft power worthy of an aspiring global power. Perhaps, its response may have been driven by the realisation, that it would earn more credibility and strategic mileage by participating in the reconstruction phase, an area where it has more expertise and capacity. Reconstruction and rehabilitation afford more visibility and acceptability after the initial euphoria subsides. The other issue that China is still to grapple with is its internal response architecture, which is yet to mature and faces many challenges, including problems of coordination among a complex series of ministries, departments and agencies at the national, provincial and local levels."³³

Clearly, China has a long way to go before it becomes a truly responsible global power.

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