



PUNE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE



**HA/DR and Image-building:
China as the New Humanitarian Actor in the
Indo-Pacific and its Implications for QUAD**

October 2024

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Abstract: In the contemporary era of rapid climate change, natural disasters as well as man-made ones have become increasingly commonplace. The geological predisposition of the Indo-Pacific makes it prone to large-scale natural calamities like cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes and more. Regional Disaster Relief mechanisms are underdeveloped, and bilateral partnerships in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) have taken precedence. Over the decades, China has developed the force structure to support global disaster relief and rescue missions. The paper, therefore, seeks to delineate the underlying motivations driving the growth of China's HA/DR sector and contextualises it within the ambit of Humanitarianism and Image-Building. The study utilises Joseph Nye Jr.'s Soft Power framework to investigate how China's HA/DR missions contribute to its strategic objectives and influence regional geopolitics. The role played by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is also outlined to highlight the civil-military nexus in disaster relief. In addition, China's multilateral exchanges and capacity-building exercises with the countries of the Indo-Pacific become important due to the inherent Great Power Competition (GPC) within the region. A critical aspect of this research is understanding the implications of China's HA/DR engagements on the QUAD—comprising India, Japan, the United States, and Australia, thereby mapping the way forward in regional disaster management practices.

Keywords: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR), People's Liberation Army (PLA), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), Indo-Pacific, Soft Power

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List of Acronyms	
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CISAR	China International Search and Rescue
CRED	Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
HA/DR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
HQJOC	Australian Headquarters Joint Operations Command
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INSARAG	International Urban Search and Rescue Advisory Group
IONS	Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
LPD	Landing Platform Docks
LPH	Landing Platform Helicopters
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
MRSS	Multi-Role Supply Ships
NDRF	National Disaster Response Force
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid
PIC	Pacific Island Countries
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SFDRR	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction
SSCAF	South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development

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1. Introduction

Disasters are unforeseen challenges threatening human lives, governance systems, and critical infrastructure. As suggested by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), any “situation or event that overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to the national and international level for external assistance, or is recognised as such by a multilateral agency or by at least two sources, such as national, regional, or international assistance groups and the media” (Guha-Sapir et al. 2004, pg.16) can be designated as a natural disaster. Based on the etymological approach, one may distinguish between natural and man-made disasters. The former category can be further categorised into “meteorological disasters, hydrological disasters, geophysical disasters and climatological disasters” (Ha et al., 2019, p.1), while the latter category refers to events that are caused either due to neglect or accident.

One such landmark hydrological disaster was the Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004). It was amongst the largest recorded disasters in human history, precisely because of the number of countries affected, the sheer volume of casualties, and the large-scale relief efforts and donor response. In other words, it was the “world’s first truly global disaster” (Athukorala and Resosudarmo, 2005). By February 2005, the UN body OCHA reported that more than US\$8 billion had been pledged for reconstruction and rehabilitation operations. It also led to the adoption of the landmark Hyogo Framework for Action, which was time-framed for 2005-2015. Consequently, the rising global warming levels and the fragility of human life sent waves of alarm and panic across the globe.

The Indo-Pacific region lies at the epicentre of disaster relief activities. It houses two of the fastest-sinking regions in the world (Jakarta and Kiribati). Furthermore, as suggested by the World Bank, the Indo-Pacific might house up to 90 million climate refugees by the end of 2050 (Clayton, 2024). The regional geographical predisposition makes it prone to natural calamities like flash floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis. The region experiences repeated challenges such as flooded deltas, severe drought episodes, earthquakes and tsunamis, crop damage from cyclones, and erosion affecting beaches and riverbanks. Thereafter, climate change has also added external pressure to the already delicate ecological fabric of the region, alongside the rapidly growing population demographics, making it a hotspot for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) activities.

Consequently, the practice of HA/DR became a significant component of China’s humanitarian outreach after the Indian Ocean Tsunami. Hu Jintao’s ‘Historic Missions’ speech (2004), which was delivered during the same time, highlighted HA/DR missions as an important aspect of the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) operations abroad. It fell under the broader ambit of the Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), the bedrock doctrine for all non-traditional security operations undertaken by the PLA. The Armed Forces have traditionally held an important role in overseeing the development and institutionalisation of humanitarian logistics during relief and rescue operations. The ‘Guidelines on The Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies’ (2003) states that the armed forces might undertake direct assistance, indirect assistance, and infrastructural support in the time of any complex emergency. While direct assistance includes the handover of essential goods and supplies to the population, indirect assistance alludes to the humanitarian logistics mainly but not limited to transportation. Finally, infrastructural support refers to the reconstruction efforts post the immediate aid.

Figure 1: China’s humanitarian spending on natural disasters and complex emergencies, 2004-2016

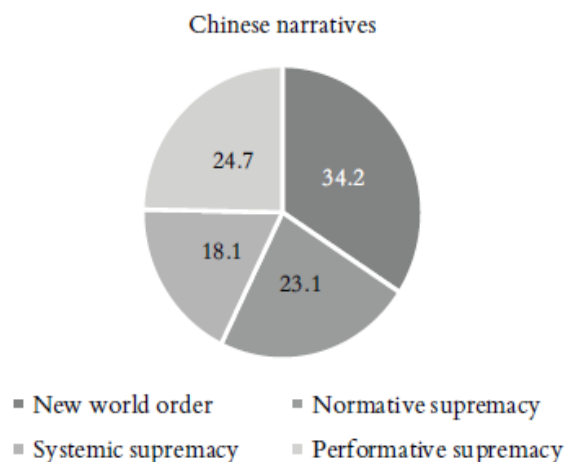
Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Natural disasters ¹⁰	43	17.59	0.59	0.82	4.9	0	33.86	19.8	3.73	1.85	47.04	23.2	1.74
Food insecurity ¹¹	0	3	0.3	0.25	2.8	0	2.2	66.62	18.78	1	1	13	10.05
Unallocated ¹²	0	2.5	0.2	0.5	0.5	1.05	1.5	0.5	0.53	0.53	0.53	0.53	0.53
Other ¹³	1.21	0	0	5.3	1	0	0	0	4.35	3.2	3.91	0	7.5
Total	44.21	23.09	1.09	6.87	9.2	1.05	37.56	86.92	27.39	6.58	52.48	36.73	19.82

Source: OCHA FTS. (Figures US\$m)

Hu Jintao realised that the rise of China’s political and economic clout had to be accompanied by a growing consciousness around humanitarianism. Subsequently, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) facilitated the adoption of an Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters (2006) to place human rights at the centre of the disaster relief effort. This was followed by the ‘Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction’ (SFDRR). It highlighted three major aspects of disaster management, “exposure to hazards, vulnerability, and capacity” (Singh, 2022, p. 90). Additionally, there was a shift in the global humanitarian discourse from the West to the South, which led to increased participation in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) activities from emerging relief actors like China, India, and Australia.

A key challenge for China was to find a way to balance its national interests abroad while “promoting the figure of an altruistic and benevolent force.” It used every opportunity to assert its global ambitions and ‘gain face’ (yao mianzi). In the process, the Chinese leadership realised the goodwill potential of engaging in disaster relief operations. It also enabled the PLA to reorient itself from being a “defensive, rigid, ground-centered military primarily concerned with domestic issues to transforming into a joint, highly flexible, and expeditionary force with the capability to project power.” (U.S. Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019). Furthermore, Chinese efforts at portraying itself as a global humanitarian leader go back to the larger narrative of a new world order that shall be rooted in Chinese supremacy. (Gurol, 2023)

Figure 2: Chinese narratives, with usage in percentages (Gurol, 2023)



Therefore, **this paper aims to fill a critical gap, by presenting new perspectives on the intersection of humanitarian assistance, soft power, and geopolitics.** By integrating concepts

from international relations, disaster management, and military strategy, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of Chinese image-building efforts and its subsequent power projection strategy. This understanding is crucial for studying the implications of Beijing's actions on regional security dynamics, particularly concerning the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and for developing relevant policy responses to enhance regional disaster management cooperation.

The paper is organised into six sections. It begins with a brief introduction that traces the importance of HA/DR in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasising the increasing frequency of natural disasters, and the geopolitical implications of China's HA/DR activities. In doing so, the introduction allows for a broader understanding of the strategic motivations behind China's disaster relief efforts. The subsequent section provides a literature review, examining existing scholarship on HA/DR, particularly focusing on China's evolving role in this domain. The methodology section outlines the research framework, employing Joseph Nye Jr's Soft Power theory to analyse China's HA/DR missions. Subsequently, the following section explores China's HA/DR activities in detail, discussing the PLA's involvement and the broader implications for China's soft power and image-building efforts. Finally, the last section addresses the strategic concerns of the QUAD countries while offering policy recommendations for enhancing regional disaster management practices. Conclusively, it discusses the main findings and also presents a way forward for Chinese HA/DR engagements.

2. Literature Review

HA/DR is a rapidly evolving field of enquiry, that attracts scholarship from academia, policymakers, and serving and retired army officers alike. Upon reviewing the available literature, a trend has been identified wherein disasters have been variably described according to the purpose, and disciplinary orientation of the scholar. They are broadly categorised in accordance with their speed of onset and origins. The former includes “sudden or cataclysmic and slow-onset disasters”, (Andharia, 2019) while the latter differentiates between disasters of “endogenous and exogenous origin” (natural and man-made, respectively). “Cyclones, floods, earthquakes and tornadoes” are said to be destructive, whereas “drought, desertification, post-conflict situations and global warming” can be classified as slow-onset disasters.

Much of the current scholarship on Chinese humanitarian aid tends to highlight Beijing's growing involvement in the development-based infrastructure and its pursuit of natural resources. However, it becomes crucial to make a clear distinction between China's development aid and its disaster relief efforts from the outset. Aid-giving, a term often misunderstood and highly politicised, plays a fundamental role in humanitarian relief and rescue missions. Moreover, the phrase “Aid for Development” is frequently used for categorising all forms of material and financial assistance, even though development aid, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief constitute distinct categories. Scholarly efforts largely focus on defining and differentiating these forms of aid. Humanitarian aid can be loosely defined as the provision of short-term aid and relief to save human lives alongside alleviating the damage and suffering caused to the crisis-affected populations. (Hilhorst, 2018). Development aid, in contrast, is aimed at fostering medium to long-term systemic changes that strive to improve life satisfaction and well-being (Gasper, 1996). These two types of aid differ in their management approaches, budgetary requirements, and the methods undertaken to fulfil those needs.

Over the years, the concept of Human Security has developed a close affinity with HA/DR efforts. The idea presents an attractive normative framework for shifting the emphasis on security from the state level to individuals and communities. While discussing the notion of multilateralism and cooperative security, scholars often make critical observations wherein they point out that human security can become a point of contestation and is essentially a vision of the like-minded.

Herein it becomes crucial to understand the Chinese conception of HA/DR that differs significantly from a Western donor perspective. The former is restrictive in terms of the nature of the disaster, as Beijing limits its outreach to active conflict zones. This allows the international humanitarian community to criticise China's selective assistance. However, the country maintains its position on the grounds of respecting the sovereignty, as well as a nation's territorial integrity.

The HA/DR scholarship has also increasingly focused on the military-civilian nexus in disaster relief and assistance. Military engagement in disaster management practices has been a norm since the early 1990s. The scholars who are critical of the armed forces' involvement in HA/DR opine that the practice is "inefficient, inappropriate, inadequate, and expensive; contrary to humanitarian principles; and driven by political imperatives rather than humanitarian need" (Canyon and Burkle, 2019, p.2). In examining China's relief efforts in Southeast Asia, Gong (2021) highlights that often disaster-related activities facilitate dialogue and cooperation among hostile parties. She stresses the importance of humanitarian aid, knowledge-sharing, and operational support over significant military involvement. Nevertheless, such assertions find less support in the broader humanitarian literature. Canyon and Burkle (2019) study the rationale behind extensive military involvement in HA/DR activities and outline fourteen principles guiding such actions. The major ones among them relate to advancing soft power, justifying increasing military budgets, providing impetus to military-military relations and enabling increased military deployment.

3. Methodology

The research aims to address the lack of academic enquiry into the strategic and diplomatic implications of growing Chinese HA/DR capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. The study also attempts to identify, deconstruct, and contextualise Beijing's attempts at humanitarian image-building through its relief and reconstruction efforts. Chinese ambitions to rejuvenate their nation by 2049, and the drive to develop their DIME (diplomatic, informational, military and economic) capabilities serve as a cautionary tale for much of the Western world. However, an often-neglected aspect remains its growing HA/DR engagements, which possess significant power projection capabilities. Therefore, **the paper will address the lack of an in-depth interdisciplinary approach to understanding China's strategy of asserting itself as a humanitarian actor through its HA/DR missions.**

The study has employed an empirical, logic-oriented, and deductive discourse analysis of the available literature on HA/DR. It has derived information from journal articles and news reporting related to the theme of the research. Additionally, scholarly books along with issue briefs and blogs published on academic websites and publication houses have also been considered. Press briefings and policy papers published by official government departments have been a part of the data collection exercise and constitute the primary sources for the research. The theoretical framework of soft power by Joseph Nye Jr will aid in the conceptualisation of Chinese motivations behind employing HA/DR to further its strategic objectives. While there are raging debates about the efficiency of soft power in shaping geopolitical discourses, it is still a preferred lens to understand the nexus between non-traditional security dimensions and state behaviour.

The research questions under study are as follows:

Q. What motivates China to develop its HA/DR capabilities, and how does this effort impact its global humanitarian appeal?

Q. Does the growing prominence and expansion of Chinese HA/DR diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific present a strategic concern for the QUAD?

4. Chinese HA/DR: Theory and Praxis

A translation of humanitarian assistance in Mandarin is the concept of ‘*rendao zhuyi yuanzhu*’, which significantly differs from the larger conception of “*jiuzai* or assistance in disaster areas”. In the case of the former, it is used to contextualise emergency relief that is provided upon the victim country’s call for help, while the latter is used to refer to both domestic and international disaster relief. *Jiuzai* also refers to reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts that make it broader in scope and applicability (Hirono, 2013).

Chinese conception of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief is not the same as it is understood in the West. It is a component of Beijing’s Development Cooperation, which is known as ‘Emergency Humanitarian Aid’ in the government’s foreign policy circles. In its “January 2021 Foreign Aid White Paper”, Beijing highlighted that its Emergency Humanitarian Assistance included six sub-categories: “Food Aid/Famine Relief, Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction, Disaster Preparation and Mitigation, and finally Migrant/refugee support” (Moreno, 2022). China prefers bilateral humanitarian assistance over multilateral frameworks. It also avoids providing aid in politically sensitive situations and opts to extend support in cases of natural hazards and health crises. Therefore, there is no doubt that China utilises its economic strength to further its soft power goals like humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, since Beijing does not have clearly defined parameters for disaster relief operations, the lack of transparency gives rise to international speculations. This ambiguity also often leads to unconventional ways of aid delivery and logistical support.

4.1 Core Elements of Chinese Image-building

The Chinese growth story has intrigued scholars and policymakers from all over the world. Key factors contributing to Beijing’s global dominance include its population, the available continental land mass, the title of being the world’s second-largest economy, largest foreign-exchange reserves, and the world’s second-largest military budget (Shambaugh, 2014). This influence is notably felt in various sectors, prominently exemplified by the securitisation of the South China Sea, followed by the rapid investments through its ambitious “Belt and Road Initiative”. The latter becomes an interesting starting point for analysing Beijing’s strategic efforts to bolster its international humanitarian image.

The ‘One Belt One Road’ policy, a brainchild of Xi Jinping in 2013 and later rebranded as the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), has been designated as a milestone foreign policy event in Chinese history. It has also evolved into a tool of Chinese soft power (Rahman, 2019), and scholars have highlighted the Chinese *modus operandi* of ‘influence via investment’ (Ishmael, 2019). Additionally, China’s rise to power has been driven by strong commercial and economic considerations. This is reflected in Beijing’s rapid investments across ports and allied infrastructures in many developing nations. Such investments secure Chinese trade interests by streamlining shipping costs as well as capitalising on export opportunities. There is also an emerging trend of ‘civil military’ fusion in many of the infrastructural projects, further raising the risks of military entrapment, economic coercion, commercial espionage, and so on.

Herein it becomes important to understand Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power. Unlike the traditional notion of military power, it focuses on the ability of co-option and not

coercion. It gives primacy to attraction and persuasion, which influences the decision of a particular entity. Contrary to military power which stresses militarisation and economic dominance, soft power emphasises intangible elements that have an impact on the power status of a country. Nye's concept of soft power stressed intangible assets like values, institutions, appealing culture and policies but this notion of soft power has changed as states' behaviour can also be influenced using infrastructural and developmental programmes, which are tangible assets. A different approach to soft power is provided by Alexander Vuving, through the prism of Chinese soft power influence. China's soft power project is based on the components of attraction, i.e., brilliance, benignity, and beauty (Vuving, 2009). The benign pillar of soft power makes Chinese soft power inherently peaceful and cooperative.

The debate surrounding the Chinese "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy also brings out a different contour of China's international image and soft power projection. The initial approach adopted by Deng Xiaoping bordered on hiding one's strength in order to bide more time for growth and development. There was an inherent focus on non-interference, followed by the idea of a peaceful rise to power. However, the recent rhetoric is denoted by marked aggression and public confrontations against state criticism. Therefore, China's diplomatic rhetoric and communication with its foreign counterparts have highlighted its growing power status, as well as its intent to shape international narratives. While some of the developing countries acknowledge the Chinese posture as a pushback against the hegemonic Western narrative, others simply take it as a mark of Beijing's growing ambitions. (Yuan, 2023) Therefore, the centrality of HA/DR in Chinese foreign and military policy brings forth an often-overlooked aspect of Beijing's image-building attempts.

Over the decades, President Xi Jinping has significantly increased China's economic contributions towards disaster-related activities. This is evident from the development of the "South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund" (SSCAF), and Chinese sponsorship of the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund. These initiatives are a part of the overall Chinese global humanitarian funding, which is then appropriated during disaster-relief missions. Lina Gong (2021) has highlighted Beijing's growing preference for aid delivery to humanitarian emergencies that are caused by natural disasters, over conflict zones. She cites a government report (2021) which states that 47.77 per cent of the funds from the SSCAF were reserved for emergency responses related to public health, post-disaster reconstruction efforts, and food and agricultural security. While only 5.27 per cent was kept aside for refugees and migrant crises. Beijing's efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath also stand testament to China's growing intent and capability to efficiently respond, manage and mitigate critical health emergencies. Vaccine diplomacy was an ingenious way to show solidarity and bring relief to much of the developing world.

Table 1: List of Chinese HA/DR engagements in the Indo-Pacific

Country	Year	Type of Disaster	Military Assets Deployed
Indonesia	2004	Tsunami	PLA Navy medical ship
Bangladesh	2007	Cyclone Sidr	China donated one million US dollars to Bangladesh for relief and reconstruction.

Myanmar	2008	Cyclone Nargis	The deputy director of the Guangzhou Military Region led a group of 50 personnel. Treatment of more than 4,000 patients. 32 tons of vehicles, food, and medicines were also delivered aboard two PLA Air Force (PLAAF) Il-76 transports.
Haiti	2010	Earthquake	60-person search-and-rescue team and 43 medical staff
Pakistan	2010	Floods	Three Il-76 transports delivered an estimated 90 tons of relief materials. This was later followed up by 60 tons of relief supplies distributed directly to affected areas from four PLA Chinese Mi-17 helicopters.
Japan	2011	Earthquake/Tsunami	15 China International Search and Rescue Team (CISAR) personnel
Thailand	2011	Floods	Sent three Il-76 transports to deliver 72 tons of aid.
Philippines	2013	Typhoon Haiyan	Beijing sent across aid worth US\$200,000, then included relief items worth US\$1.6 million.
Malaysia	2014	Missing Aircraft	A fleet of destroyers, frigates and amphibious ships, along with a survey vessel, a submarine rescue ship, and 2 replenishment vessels. Additionally, 2 helicopters, 3 transport aircraft, and a surveillance plane
Maldives	2014	Water Crisis	Chinese Navy submarine rescue ship with 700 tons of freshwater; two aircrafts of the Chinese Air Force (Ilyushin Il-76) loaded with 40 tons of drinking water
Nepal	2015	Earthquake	3 helicopters, 8 transport aircraft; more than 500 PLA personnel; delivery (at least 449 tons) and distribution of relief supplies, transport of relief personnel and equipment, search and rescue, transport of people who were injured or trapped, medical assistance, and disease prevention

Myanmar	2015	Cyclone Komen	The PLA deployed two military aircraft to send across the relief items. The provincial government of Yunnan and the prefecture government of Dehong issued several batches of aid to Mandalay.
Indonesia	2018	Earthquake	China provided relief materials and monetary aid after the earthquakes. These were offered to Lombok by the Chinese Red Cross Society. For central Sulawesi, Beijing offered US\$200,000 monetary aid, and other supplies such as 12,000 tents, 3,000 water purifiers, over 200 electricity generators.
Tonga	2022	Tsunami	Beijing sent a Y-20 heavy transport plane that was loaded with emergency supplies, followed by two vessels, including a Type 071 amphibious transport dock ship and a supply ship.

It also becomes important to note that as China expands its international mediation initiatives and advocacy for human rights promotion, it is trying to balance the previously mentioned ‘Wolf-warrior’ style of diplomatic communication. Therefore, regional collaboration on HA/DR exercises and information-sharing for disaster preparedness improves Beijing’s image as a responsible stakeholder. Additionally, while some Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines adopt a more restrictive approach in accepting Chinese relief material, many Pacific Island Countries (PIC) are increasingly engaging with Beijing at multiple operational levels. Herein the role of the PLA as an extended benign arm of Beijing’s relief efforts should also be taken into consideration.

4.2 PLA: The New Humanitarian Actor

As has been established, Hu’s four historic missions brought forth the merits of PLA’s involvement in HA/DR activities. Kamphausen et al. (2014) examined the trajectory of HA/DR activities during Hu Jintao's leadership, highlighting their strategic importance in bolstering Beijing's soft power. Hu recognised the necessity for technological advancements to enhance the PLA's disaster relief capabilities, leading to increased defence expenditures aligned with MOOTW objectives. However, Gong (2021) outlines the demerits of a military-focused approach and promotes a broader understanding of disaster diplomacy. She opines that “military involvement does not necessarily reflect the actual level of a country’s activism accurately” (Gong, 2021, p. 79).

The concept of MOOTW is pivotal in understanding this discourse. Unlike many other militaries, MOOTW is formally integrated into Chinese military strategy. The shift towards non-traditional security emerged post-Cold War, influenced by the PRC's endorsement

of a "New Security Concept," which broadens traditional notions of security. MOOTW was first introduced in a policy document called 'Outline of Military Training and Evaluation' (2001), and later found prominence in the Ministry of National Defence's 2008 White Paper. The operational definition of the doctrine has been often revisited, but the current understanding is reflected in the 2011 edition of the "Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army":

"Military operations that the armed forces carry out to protect national security and developmental interests, but which do not directly constitute warfare. They include such actions as counterterrorism, stability maintenance, disaster relief, safeguarding national interests, security alerts, international peacekeeping, and international rescue operations."
(McReynolds, 2017, p.368)

Chinese military strategists highlight the importance of HA/DR operations within the broader ambit of MOOTW. Initially, the focus was largely domestic, and the PLA pursued social stability operations, as evident from the Regulation on the Army's Participation in Disaster Rescue (2005) and the Emergency Response Law of the People's Republic of China (2007). But as Beijing's overseas economic commitments grew, so did the scope of their MOOTW activities. In assessing the strategic purpose of the MOOTW doctrine, McReynolds (2017) highlights that while it builds Beijing's image abroad, it also indicates the country's focus on "strategic return on investment". This philosophy informs PLA's HA/DR exchanges with foreign militaries, wherein the former has the rare opportunity to get first-hand insights and intelligence on the workings of advanced militaries. PLA has conducted bilateral exercises with several partner nations like Malaysia, Germany, Cambodia, Australia, India, and New Zealand. Multilaterally as well, the PLA has participated in Komodo, the Indonesian Multilateral Naval Exercise, which according to Southerland et al. (2019) covered "aerial reconnaissance, underway replenishment, cross-deck helicopter landing, and maritime interdiction components—all key operational competencies that would be applicable to a blockade of Taiwan." (p. 4)

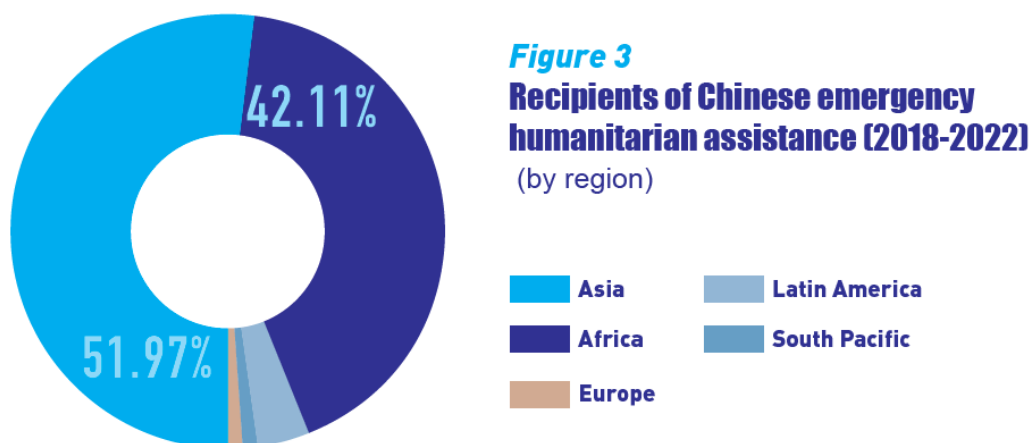
The PLA has also taken this opportunity to focus on upgrading its operational capabilities, which remain a crucial factor for the success of any relief effort. The China International Search and Rescue Team (CISAR) stands at the forefront of disaster operations. It consists of officers from the PLA engineering corps and acts as a rapid response force, especially for earthquakes. By 2010, it had already acquired the status of "UN's 12th certified international heavy rescue team" (Kamphausen et al., 2014, p. 479). With the changing nature of warfare, some scholars also suggest that HA/DR is one of the most important contributions of the army. A growing debate among Chinese Armed Forces scholars is the emergence of service rivalries and the declining relevance of the PLA. So, while the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is preoccupied with the Taiwan Strait crisis as well as the tensions in the South China Sea, the PLAAF is actively upgrading its power projection capabilities. This leaves the ground forces with a pressing need for an image-building rationale, which is then provided by the HA/DR missions.

The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has been a frontrunner for vital domestic disaster relief operations, like the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, but has been largely absent from international HA/DR efforts. However, the former has been involved in large-scale global rescue missions for Chinese nationals. Upon special instructions from Hu Jintao, the PLAAF "sent four IL-76s to evacuate Chinese civilians from Libya. Altogether, the

aircraft flew 1,655 Chinese from Libya to Khartoum, Sudan, and then brought 287 back to China” (Kamphausen et al., 2014, p. 477). Other key contributions can be traced to the Pakistan and Thailand floods (2011). According to a China Air Force report, PLAAF planes transported relief supplies worth 30 million Renminbi from Urumqi to Pakistan, covering a distance of 3,000 kilometres. In total, these flights carried 390 tons of supplies, comprising 7,000 individual items. In October, three IL-76s transported approximately 100 tons of relief goods to Thailand.

Lastly, for the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), it has been a learning curve. Their initial response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004) was highly disappointing as compared to other powers like the United States. Thereafter, PLAN invested in the Peace Ark, a hospital ship that has 300 beds and multiple operation theatres run by personnel from the “PLAN’s General Hospital, 411th Hospital, and 413th Hospital” (Kamphausen et al., 2014, p. 481). This “Anwei Class Hospital Ship” operates out of the Zhejiang Province and is later docked in disaster-affected areas.

Figure 3: Recipients of Chinese HA/DR



5. Strategic Concerns for QUAD

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is a platform for strategic cooperation, policy coordination, and implementation in the Indo-Pacific. It consists of the United States, India, Australia and Japan. The grouping was loosely established after the devastating Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004) for coordinating humanitarian and disaster relief efforts. Soon after, the idea of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ found gravitas in the security lexicon of these countries. This was majorly influenced by geostrategic considerations like Beijing’s maritime dominance and the need for regional collaboration. Recently, the QUAD leaders signed into operation the guidelines for the ‘Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific’. However, as Stevenson and Envall (2019) highlight, the international bias towards bilateral HA/DR cooperation is growing, and the political tensions that accompany an assertive China will further make it difficult to convince strategists about the disaster relief provisions of the QUAD. Therefore, it becomes necessary to view the HA/DR strategies of each member

state in order to weigh their rationale, contributions, and strategic considerations vis-a-vis China.

5.1 The United States

The U.S. Foreign Assistance Act (1961) resulted in the creation of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and codified Washington's role in the international disaster mitigation and response mechanism for years to come. It has particularly been instrumental in shaping the Indo-Pacific's early response mechanism and risk mitigation techniques. Washington's presence in the form of its military bases, multilateral naval exercises, and well-established humanitarian logistical supply chain has aided in the quick delivery of aid, disaster-warning signals, and information-sharing.

In terms of logistical operability, the US-China HA/DR exchanges have been very closely monitored by Washington. Herein, the National Defence Authorization Act for the Fiscal Year 2000 (Public Law 106-65) becomes noteworthy. This does not allow the U.S. Military to engage in any bilateral exercise that "would create national security risk due to inappropriate exposure to any of the 12 areas such as force projection, advanced combined arms and joint combat operations, and advanced logistics. However, the law allows for search and rescue and humanitarian operations and exercises." (Southerland et al., 2019, p. 4) The annual US-China Disaster Management Exchange includes table-top and field exercises, which extensively cover search and rescue operations, medical assistance, debris clearance, and so on. Furthermore, many multilateral military exercises like the US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) and the Cobra Gold exercise have significant HA/DR components. The PLA has been an active participant in such exchanges and treats them as strategic opportunities to acquire relevant expertise for combat and force projection. According to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission interviews, the PLA members are "at least as interested in learning traditional military training and capabilities through these exercises as they are in building humanitarian capability". (Ibid)

5.2 India

The Indian disaster relief narrative is consent-based, need-appropriate, and guided by an immense respect for the sovereignty and territoriality of the affected countries. The Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004) brought a drastic change in the institutional orientation of New Delhi's HA/DR strategy and led to the enactment of the Disaster Management Act (2005). It established the "largest standalone response force in the world"—the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF). Adhering to the internationally recognised guidelines of "humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence", India soon became a 'first responder' in South Asia and put "external HA/DR on India's policy map." (C. Mohan, 2014)

In projecting India's relief capabilities and humanitarian logistics supremacy, multilateral exercises hosted by New Delhi have been a global success. They have highlighted India's collective approach towards disaster mitigation and capacity-building. In terms of the relationship between HA/DR and India's regional foreign policy outreach, such engagements have given an impetus to programmes like the 'Neighbourhood First', 'Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)', and finally the 'Act East Policy'. New Delhi has maintained an upper hand in providing disaster relief support to its neighbours

in South Asia. An active Chinese presence in the region has been deemed to pose a strategic threat to the Indian First Responder status. Herein, the two cases of the Maldives water crisis and the Nepal earthquake stand out.

The Malé government announced a state of crisis in 2014 after the country's lone water sewage treatment facility caught fire. The incident left more than 100,000 residents in the capital city of Malé without proper access to safe drinking water. India rushed to its southern neighbour's aid, by deploying 3 C-17 and IL-76 aircraft each to carry potable water from capital to Arakkonam, and from there to Malé. Reportedly, between 5th and 7th September 2014, the Indian Air Force airlifted 374 tonnes of drinking water to Maldives. Additionally, around 35 tonnes of fresh water and two Reverse Osmosis (RO) plants were carried onboard by INS Sukanya, each having a production capacity of 20 tonnes of fresh water daily. Operation Neer was a great success among the Malé government and its citizens, but for the first time India's first-responder status was prominently challenged by Chinese relief efforts. Beijing had sent its submarine rescue ship, which provided 70 tons of desalted water daily. Additionally, the PLAAF sent two of their Ilyushin Il-76 aircraft that were loaded with 40 tons of potable water. Just the year before in October 2013, Beijing had proposed the idea of a Maritime Silk Road (MSR), enhancing connectivity between China and the Maldives, highlighting the strategic nature of relations. Recently, Beijing again extended help to the Maldives, which currently faces rising sea levels due to erratic rainfall. It gave around 3,000 metric tons of Tibetan glacial water to Malé in two consecutive shipments in March, and the next in May 2024. Therefore, while Chinese humanitarian assistance brought in some much-needed relief to Maldives, it also highlighted the inhumane nature of PRC's water weaponisation tactics in Tibet.

During the Nepal earthquake of 2015, China deployed more than "500 PLA personnel", who tirelessly worked towards helping the victims and clearing out the infrastructural damage. However, it did not cooperate with the other militaries, which led to widespread international criticism. Kathmandu had segregated the disaster-affected areas between India, China, and the US. Despite repeated attempts at establishing a coordinated relief mechanism, the PLA refused to cooperate and treated their sector as sovereign territory. Nevertheless, both the governments of India and China at the time hinted towards future collaborations in disaster management. An MOU was also signed for collaboration on earthquake science and engineering (Anderson and Ayres, 2015). This was further strengthened by Xi Jinping's call for enhanced cooperation among members in disaster relief at the Ufa Summit (2015), where New Delhi and Islamabad got permanent membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

However, the initial spirit of cooperation between Beijing and New Delhi no longer guides their foreign policy actions. The geopolitical realities as well as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have enabled a substantial increase in active HA/DR engagements. Subsequently, an agreement has also been signed in 2019 between Ishwar Pokharel, the Nepali Defence Minister, and his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe, which focuses on disaster relief and capacity building. Such developments have cautioned New Delhi. Therefore, to uphold New Delhi's role as the regional 'First Responder,' it is essential to establish an effective timeframe mechanism (72 hours) for dispatching relief by the responsible authorities.

5.3 Australia

Canberra has strategically developed its HA/DR outreach as one of its ‘niche diplomacy’ policies. Disaster relief operations have increased international goodwill as well as improved Australia’s bilateral relations with its QUAD counterparts and many Southeast Asian states like Indonesia. Canberra’s contemporary HA/DR rationale is laid out in its 2016 official Humanitarian Strategy document, which covers four major aspects: Capacity building in the Indo-Pacific, Regional Cooperation, Disaster Risk Reduction, and Post-Disaster Recovery. These objectives are also relevant to the Australian defence outlook, wherein working towards regional peace and stability (particularly in the South Pacific), counterterrorism, and boosting multilateral collaborations (e.g., with ASEAN) become prominent (Stevenson and Envall, 2019).

In terms of humanitarian logistics and operational capabilities, Australia’s search and rescue team has been designated as a ‘heavy’ or top-level team by the renowned International Urban Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG). It also holds the distinction of being a Type 2 Emergency Medical team as classified by the World Health Organization. Interestingly, the China International Emergency Medical Team is one of only two teams with the highest Type 3 categorisation. With such advanced resources, China has increased its outreach to Oceania. It is a cluster of small islands that spread across the central and South Pacific. When the latter was severely affected by the two Cyclones (Pam and Wilson) in 2015 and 2016, respectively, the Chinese Peace Arks made several visits to these strategically important island nations. These countries are also crucial in advancing Beijing’s “One-China Policy”, as only Tuvalu, Nauru, Marshall Islands, and Palau still recognise Taiwan (Tiezzi, 2020). The much-coveted security pact between Beijing and the Solomon Islands has also raised concerns among many Australian policymakers. The agreement involves China potentially stationing PLA Navy vessels near Australia, which could significantly influence Australia’s defence strategies in the Pacific (Green, 2022). It is noteworthy that many Chinese attempts at forming a region-wide partnership were rebuked by some of the members of the Pacific Islands Forum. Nevertheless, Beijing’s bilateral engagements with many other Pacific Island Countries are indicative of a positive partnership based on collaboration and mutual trust.

5.4 Japan

As an island nation, Japan has always prioritised humanitarian operational superiority over traditional military capabilities. The country has been at the receiving end of multiple devastating natural disasters in its modern history. Just as MOOTW sits at the heart of PLA’s involvement in HA/DR engagements, for Japan, the purely non-combat operations of MOOTW (NCMO) represent their stronghold. The Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) had dispatched more than 1,000 personnel for the Indian Ocean Tsunami, making this their first three-wings (Land, Air and Naval forces) coordinated effort. This was further developed during Shinzo Abe’s “Proactive Contribution to Peace” approach, which identified HA/DR to be a priority area for regional collaboration.

The country, much like Australia, holds a niche sphere of influence over Southeast Asia with regards to its regional HA/DR engagements. Disaster assistance is deeply rooted in the country’s Official Development Assistance (ODA). Tokyo has used its ODA policy to mend, build, and reconcile with the victims of its troubled colonial past. Such strategic

calculations eventually enabled Japan to deter Beijing's aggressive motives in the Indo-Pacific. The countries in the immediate vicinity of these two Asian rivals, like the Philippines, "explicitly underscored China's construction of military installations on artificial islands in disputed waters over rich natural resources such as untapped oil, natural gas, and fishing areas" as a source of anxiety" (Shahreen, 2022, para.10) in the Disaster Management Reference Handbook (2021). Interestingly, Japan employs a strategy encompassing both hard and soft infrastructure, branded as "quality infrastructure," incorporating disaster risk reduction. In contrast, Beijing has historically favoured hard infrastructure but has now realised the image-building potential of humanitarian capacity building.

6. Conclusion

HA/DR operations have turned competitive, sometimes even transforming into a zero-sum game that significantly empowers recipient states with bargaining leverage. Since HA/DR does not occur in isolation, its politicisation increasingly influences the outcome of these operations. The extent of political involvement by HA/DR actors significantly affects logistics and, consequently, operational efficacy, as implementation requires the consent of recipient countries. Initially, the Chinese position on HA/DR was that of international cooperation and humanitarian goodwill. However, in the due course of research, it has been highlighted that HA/DR has also been advanced as a foreign policy instrument on many occasions. It fosters strong bilateral partnerships, while also promoting cooperation among militaries. Consequently, it holds immense value both in terms of military capabilities and strength projection of the Chinese Armed Forces to strategic observers. Alternatively, undertaking extensive relief and rescue missions also projects a country's growing prominence as a responsible humanitarian actor. Therefore, it is fair to state that HA/DR engagements blur the distance between "soft" and "hard" power activities.

The Way Forward: Policy Implications

Beijing has realised that there is a steady rise of new and complex emergencies. Terror attacks, large-scale industrial accidents like gas leaks or nuclear reactor failures and environmental emergencies are all potential sectors of crisis. Furthermore, cyber-attacks have become commonplace, threatening to disrupt supply chains, communication satellites and damage undersea fibre optic cables as well. Therefore, Chinese capabilities to respond to such challenges need to be strategically built and geopolitically advanced.

The Chinese need for visibility and image-building often gets in the way of cooperation with other international humanitarian actors and development agencies. As highlighted by Hirono (2018), "China is not a member of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) or of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)'s Donor Support Group, for instance, nor is it part of the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative". Therefore, such an absence of collaboration can lead to uncoordinated and wasted efforts within a response, as was the case during the Tongan tsunami relief efforts (2022). Beijing was conspicuously absent from the HA/DR international coordination cell established at Australian Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HJQOC). So, to be recognised as a credible HA/DR partner, Beijing needs to

first establish a network based in the region for aid distribution, which can expedite response during disasters. Second, it should contribute to coordinated relief efforts to foster mutual trust and cooperation with other humanitarian actors.

Furthermore, Chinese emphasis on space-based disaster monitoring will also enhance Beijing's contribution to global disaster management practices. Reportedly in 2023, China's homegrown Fengyun meteorological satellites have issued around 300 reports indicating the nation's contribution towards global satellite remote sensing services. China Academy of Space Technology has developed the Land Surveyor 4A, the first synthetic aperture radar satellite in the world that operated in high-altitude orbit. This has enabled Beijing to partner with developing countries like Serbia's BioSense Institute, the Jagannath University in Bangladesh, and the National Space Research and Technology Center of Kazakhstan to cooperate in the field of satellite remote sensing and data sharing. Going forward, the international community, and especially the Quad should take a note of Chinese space-based developments, as such practices have manifold benefits for military surveillance and reconnaissance.

The strategic positioning of the Quad members, alongside the dominant US military presence in the region, guarantees logistical continuity between all the Quad's components. Nonetheless, questions remain as to the group's ability to spearhead and coordinate collective efforts, particularly in a context where each member harbours distinct regional priorities. Additionally, there is a constant tension between multilateral collaboration and bilateral approaches across the different sub-regions. This stems from the primary tenets of humanitarian law, which bases itself on respect for sovereignty and non-interference. In terms of the future of HA/DR practices among the Quad member states, some of the recommendations given by Frédéric Grare (2024) become relevant. He emphasises the importance of preserving existing sub-regional disaster coordination mechanisms like the Center for Operations at Sea (CRCO), and others like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). There is also a need to bring in several experienced local civilians through public-private partnerships (PPPs). By involving private sector companies in disaster preparedness and response, the member states can tap into additional resources, innovative technologies, and logistical expertise. The grouping might also consider including modules on cybercrime in their disaster management exercises and provide evacuation training to the population vulnerable to climate emergencies.

As an important member of the group, it is crucial that India adopts a standard operating procedure to coordinate its relief efforts and institutionalises them. Multiple Indian institutions partake in disaster relief; however, the final deciding authority remains ad-hoc and situational. Furthermore, to maintain New Delhi's regional 'First Responder' position, an effective time frame mechanism of 72 hours must be set. During this crucial window, relief operations must be dispatched by the authorities in charge (Upadhyay, 2021). The Indian disaster management community will also have to strive for a consistent upgrade of technology, equipment, and response strategies to comprehensively deal with the increasing frequency and severity of emergencies. To enhance its deployment capabilities, India must consider further investment in utility helicopters like the Landing Platform Helicopters (LPHs), and Landing Platform Docks (LPDs). Additionally, it is recommended that New Delhi acquires Multi-Role Supply Ships

(MRSS) equipped with HADR-specific supplies such as deployable shelter systems and relief materials (Banerji, 2023). Alongside its Quad partners, India can also focus on building joint initiatives with ASEAN nations on capacity building and interoperability exercises. Increased partnerships with resident powers like France will further strengthen India's call for better standardisation practices as well as enhance its diplomatic outreach to the littoral states.

Conclusively, Chinese HA/DR initiatives cannot be overlooked as much as their impact cannot be dismissed. However, the international community may highlight how Beijing's practices have diverged from established international HA/DR norms. This will encourage a shift in the practice of viewing recipient states from mere consumers to active stakeholders in disaster relief operations. Given the current asymmetry in resource distribution, such an endeavour might be prolonged, yet this must not deter international actors from going ahead with such an approach. The potential advantages include enhanced disaster preparedness and response, streamlined HA/DR operations, and better civil and political coordination among the different Indo-Pacific actors. Ultimately, such a strategy could also significantly diminish the political gains China achieves from its HA/DR efforts, thereby positioning it as one of many contributors, rather than a dominant force.

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