Disaster Diplomacy

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In an era of increasing global interconnectedness and climate change, natural disasters have emerged as a significant factor in shaping international relations. This phenomenon, known in some literature as "disaster diplomacy," explores how disaster-related activities influence diplomatic relations between countries, and conversely, how diplomatic ties affect disaster management efforts. Disaster diplomacy examines how disaster response and disaster risk reduction can influence global diplomacy. As defined by Kelman (2012), the core question of disaster diplomacy is: "How and why disaster-related activities do and do not create peace and reduce conflict," or alternatively, "how and why disaster-related activities do and do not induce cooperation amongst enemies."

The concept encompasses a wide range of activities, including prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery, and can serve as a tool for improving international relations or achieving diplomatic goals. Success in disaster diplomacy could mean that disaster-related activities have catalyzed diplomacy, leading to positive diplomatic outcomes such as peace deals, augmented diplomatic connections, or further talks. Additionally, positive outcomes for disaster-related activities themselves, such as improved disaster response or increased disaster risk reduction efforts, could also be considered successes. However, it should be noted that disaster diplomacy is not automatically successful. Typically, pre-existing interests supporting diplomacy are needed, as disaster-related activities alone are unlikely to create diplomatic breakthroughs.

China, with its vast and diverse territory, stands as a prime example of a nation grappling with the complex interplay between natural disasters and diplomacy. The country faces an extraordinary range of natural hazards, including earthquakes, typhoons, floods, droughts, sandstorms, landslides, and forest fires. While the impact of natural disasters varies across China's provinces, nearly two-thirds of the country's land area is at risk of flooding. The country's diverse climate, stretching from tropical regions in the south to subarctic zones in the north, contributes to the occurrence of over 100 types of natural hazards across its territory. The toll of natural disasters on China has been severe. Between 1989 and 2018, these events resulted in 195,820 deaths and direct economic losses of approximately US$1,698 billion (World Bank, 2020).

Climate change is further exacerbating China's vulnerability to natural disasters. At both the global and regional level, climate change has increased and will continue to intensify the frequency and severity of disasters in China. Specifically, the likelihood of super typhoons and intense rainfall is rising, increasing the risk of riverine and flash floods. Droughts and heat waves are projected to become more frequent and severe. Geological disasters triggered by climate extremes, such as landslides and debris flows, are expected to occur more frequently.

These climate-related risks are compounded by other factors, including rapid population growth, continued economic development, accelerating urbanization, and increasing interregional trade integration. As a result, China is facing even higher disaster risks in the future. The potential for cascading global impacts of increasing severity underscores the importance of disaster diplomacy in managing these risks.

Given China's vulnerability to natural disasters and its growing global influence, disaster diplomacy presents both challenges and opportunities for the country. As noted by experts in the field, soft power diplomacy is reliant on good relations and essential for bilateral ventures. For China, engaging in disaster diplomacy could strengthen international cooperation in disaster risk reduction and response, enhance its soft power and global image through humanitarian assistance. In turn, extending a helping hand

could improve relations with neighboring countries that face similar disaster risks, facilitating knowledge and technology exchange in disaster management, and potentially easing tensions in other areas of international relations through cooperation on disaster-related issues. A notable example of the negative outcome of poorly managed disaster diplomacy can be found in China's response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. Initially, China's modest donation drew widespread international criticism and was reported to have been influenced by territorial disputes involving the Philippines in the South China Sea. This is particularly relevant given China's active engagement with ASEAN and its member states on disaster management issues (Gong, 2021b). However, the success of these efforts will depend on various factors, including pre-existing diplomatic relationships, the specific context of each disaster situation, and the willingness of all parties to engage in meaningful cooperation.

By examining China's experience with natural disasters and its engagement in disaster diplomacy, we can gain valuable insights into the broader implications of using disaster-related activities as a means of building diplomatic ties, easing international tensions, and fostering global cooperation in the face of shared environmental challenges. This analysis can contribute to our understanding of how nations can leverage disaster management to not only reduce risks and save lives but also to build bridges and promote peace in an increasingly interconnected world.

Figure 1: Regional vulnerability to natural disasters in China, assessed using the DEA model.

Note: Reprinted from Wu, L., Ma, D., & Li, J. (2023). Assessment of the regional vulnerability to natural disasters in China based on DEA model. Sustainability, 15(14), 10936. https://doi.org/10.3390/su151410936.

China's military response to natural disasters has become integral to its disaster management approach, reflecting the country's growing emphasis on leveraging its armed forces for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. This strategy aligns with global trends of increased military involvement in disaster response since the 1990s, driven by the growing capacity gaps in global humanitarian networks and insufficient resources for UN-led HADR missions (Gong, 2021a). This is partly due to the emergence of increased human population densities and heightened pressure on governments to provide for vulnerable people. The scale of China's military mobilization, specifically for disaster relief, is substantial, owing to several factors. Among these is an overall increase in disaster risk. China faces heightened threats from natural disasters intensified by climate change, population growth, rapid urbanization, and economic development (World Bank, 2020) .

Moreover, the use of military mobilization for aid has proved itself useful in causes of natural disasters and public health crises alike. In the case of the Indo-Asia-Pacific, military management of disasters has been a long-standing domestic model against which, historically, little critique has been

wielded (Canyon, Ryan, & Burkle, 2019). As part of the implementation of this form of assistance, a guideline was developed. The outline of Asia-Pacific regional use of foreign military in natural disaster response was drafted, most directly, to convey the principle and use of foreign military assets as a complementary tool to existing relief mechanisms. Essential in the outline is the notion that deployment should be considered under core conditions, including the need to meet urgent humanitarian requirements that civilian resources cannot adequately address (OCHA, 2014).

Figure 2: Generic International Disaster Coordination ModelNote: Reprinted from Asia-Pacific Disaster Law Guidelines, by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), 2021. Retrieved from https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/media/disaster_law/2021-03/Asia%20Pacific%20Guidelines_0.pdf.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) possesses significant logistical capabilities, manpower, and equipment suitable for rapid deployment in disaster scenarios. Disaster relief operations serve as a means for China to enhance its soft power and international image through humanitarian assistance. Notably, China's approach to military deployment for disaster relief reflects a broader strategy of integrating civil and military resources for comprehensive disaster management. This approach addresses immediate humanitarian needs and serves diplomatic and strategic objectives by showcasing China's capabilities and willingness to contribute to global disaster response efforts.

The PLA's involvement in disaster management encompasses a wide range of activities. The military is crucial in building and reinforcing flood defenses, particularly along significant rivers prone to flooding. PLA units are often among the first responders in disaster-stricken areas, conducting search and rescue missions as well as evacuating affected populations. The military provides essential supplies, sets up temporary shelters and offers medical assistance to disaster victims. PLA assets, including aircraft and vehicles, transport relief materials and personnel to affected areas. Military engineering units assist in restoring critical infrastructure damaged by disasters (Gong, 2021a).

The PLA's involvement in disaster relief has increased over time, with the 2008 Sichuan earthquake response marking a significant deployment of military resources for domestic disaster relief. In the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, China struggled with its disaster management. It lacked training for military divisions mobilized to respond, in addition to uncoordinated social engagement . A significant event and a pivotal case study for the disaster diplomacy mechanism implemented by China, is the instance of the Typhoon Haiyan. China's initial response to the 2013 disaster in the Philippines was minimal and delayed. Reflecting ongoing geopolitical rivalries in the South China Sea pledged a significantly lower contribution than other countries. Despite contentious relations between the nations, the contribution amount was met with local public critique. China later extended

its navy hospital ship as an additional act of disaster relief support. This example highlights the balance between geopolitical interests of disaster response and security within the Indo-Asia-Pacific region (Southerland, 2019).

Disaster diplomacy investigates the impact of disaster-related activities on diplomatic efforts, peace-building, and conflict reduction. It explores how disaster response and risk reduction initiatives influence cooperation between adversaries and shape international relations, underscoring the significant role of disaster response in shaping the international relations landscape.

Success in disaster diplomacy may manifest as enhanced or expanded diplomatic connections or in the form of improved disaster response capabilities and increased efforts in disaster risk reduction. Some research indicates that the coupling of the advancement of disaster-related capabilities and enhanced diplomatic relations increases the risk of failure across both domains. A more nuanced approach suggests that policymakers might achieve better outcomes by maintaining separate strategic tracks for disaster management initiatives and diplomatic endeavors, allowing each to develop according to their own metrics (Kelman, 2016).

Disaster diplomacy, particularly when military assets are involved in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), serves strategic purposes that extend beyond immediate aid delivery. It can foster goodwill towards the military and facilitate the formation of non-humanitarian alliances and interventions. Moreover, disaster diplomacy can play a pivotal role in establishing positive relations that are crucial for both bilateral and multilateral endeavors, underscoring its strategic importance in shaping international relations (Canyon, Ryan, & Burkle, 2019).

The increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters have created a common vulnerability among nations, regardless of their political, economic, or social differences. This commonality occurs as hazards or phenomena with the potential to cause harm, in this case, those of natural climate threats, are coupled with vulnerability, or rather, the characteristics contributing to the potential to be harmed. Vulnerability is an outcome of extended broad social impetuses. A shared vulnerability and hazard emerging from climate risks presents challenges and opportunities for diplomatic engagement, even between traditionally adversarial states. Geographic proximity often necessitates coordinated disaster response planning, encouraging nations within a region to develop formal and informal mechanisms for cooperation. The need to pool resources and expertise for disaster preparedness and response can lead to formal agreements between nations, creating institutional frameworks for ongoing collaboration (Kelman, 2016).

A regional analysis of China's military exercises reveals distinct patterns in their thematic focus across different partner nations. With Southeast and South Asian partners, exercises primarily emphasize maritime security,

counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations, reflecting these regions' shared security challenges. Exercises with Russia and Central Asian states take a different approach, focusing on joint defense operations, strategic deterrence, and border security – priorities that align with China's strategy of strengthening defense capabilities along its continental periphery. China's military engagement with partners in the Middle East concentrates on naval operations, counterterrorism, and special forces training, demonstrating China's growing interest in shaping regional security dynamics. These varying exercise themes highlight how China tailors its military-diplomatic initiatives to align with the strategic concerns and security requirements of different regional partners (Gao & Allen, 2024).

The United States and China increasingly view disaster response capabilities as integral to national security. This shift in military priorities and capabilities has significant implications for US strategic assessments of China. China has been expanding its military's role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations domestically and internationally. This expansion reflects China's broader strategy to enhance its global influence and soft power projection, including developing specialized HADR capabilities. This is in addition to integrating HADR missions into China's broader diplomacy efforts and concern for international perception (Southerland, 2019).

The United States views China's expanding HADR capabilities through a strategic lens, considering both potential cooperation and competition: The U.S.-China Disaster Management Exchange remains one of the few areas of ongoing military-to-military cooperation (National Guard, 2013). China's HADR efforts are seen as part of its strategy to enhance regional influence, potentially challenging US primacy. HADR capabilities contribute to China's overall military modernization and power projection abilities. China's HADR engagements with neighboring countries are closely monitored for their impact on regional security architecture.

Accordingly, the implications for US-China Relations are limited. While HADR remains an area of potential cooperation, broader military-to-military engagements have been restricted since 2017 (Campbell, 2021). The US will likely continue viewing China's HADR capabilities as part of the broader context of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. As China continues to develop its military HADR capabilities, the US must balance opportunities for cooperation with strategic considerations in its overall approach to China's evolving military role.

China's increased military involvement in disaster management has significant implications for its international relations. As China-US relations become more competitive, HADR operations may increasingly be viewed through a geopolitical lens. However, there may be opportunities for diplomatic engagement through regional HADR coordination mechanisms. Collaborative efforts in HADR training and capacity building for civilian organizations could serve as areas for diplomatic engagement. Future

diplomatic efforts may need to balance operational disaster aid considerations with political realities, seeking compromises that allow for effective humanitarian response while addressing geopolitical concerns. Engaging China in established multilateral HADR frameworks could help integrate its efforts more effectively with international norms and practices.

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