

SOUTHEAST ASIA-CHINA COOPERATION IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN POST-COVID ERA

Policy Report

September 2020

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Executive Summary

Disaster relief has been a channel for trust-building and reassurance between Southeast Asia and China since the 1990s. The signing of the ASEAN-China Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Disaster Management in 2014 seemingly heralded greater engagement between the two sides in this area. However, this research finds that China is yet to become a key player in disaster management in Southeast Asia, despite strengthened interactions and increased funding support. The challenges of the China-Southeast Asia disaster cooperation include the low priority of aid work in China's diplomacy, new trends in disaster relief in Southeast Asia which include the changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the sensitive nature of military cooperation. To move forward, it is important that offers of assistance match the need of the affected communities. For this to happen, there must be increased communication at multiple levels between China and Southeast Asia.

Introduction

Globally, one of the regions that is most prone to natural hazards is Southeast Asia. In 2018 alone, the region recorded 1,568 natural hazards.¹ The region's vulnerability to disasters has made disaster management, which comprises mitigation and adaptation, preparedness, response, recovery, and rehabilitation a key area of cooperation between Southeast Asia and extra-regional partners.

Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China views security cooperation as one component of its four-prong strategy for its diplomacy towards neighbouring countries.² Given its humanitarian nature and low sensitivity, disaster management is a low-hanging fruit for security cooperation between China and its neighbours, including Southeast Asia. Moreover, growing competition and rivalry with the United States has made China value the region even more.

However, disaster cooperation has not been a priority of China's diplomacy. Despite the interactions on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief since the late 1990s, China is yet to be a key player in disaster management in Southeast Asia.³ This raises questions such as what are the challenges to deepen Southeast Asia-China cooperation in disaster management and how can Southeast Asia tap into China's growing interest in disaster cooperation.

This policy report provides a brief review of Southeast Asia-China cooperation in disaster management, identifies the challenges and opportunities for further cooperation, and proposes recommendations for moving forward. The report argues that China's offers of assistance must match the needs of Southeast Asia, and for this to happen there needs to be increasing interactions at multiple levels. Moreover, the uncertainties induced by the COVID-19 outbreak make it necessary to consider the changes and opportunities generated by the pandemic in future cooperation.

¹ "ASEAN Disaster Management Reference Handbook." Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance (2019), p.12. <https://reliefweb.int/report/indonesia/asean-disaster-management-reference-handbook-march-2019>

² Swaine, Michael D. "Chinese Views and Commentary on Periphery Diplomacy." *China Leadership Monitor* 44 (2014): 2. <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/clm44ms.pdf>

³ Author's interviews with officials of ASEAN, Jakarta, March 2019.

An Overview of China-Southeast Asia Interactions on Disaster Management

Disaster management has provided a channel for trust-building and reassurance for China in its interactions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states. The early engagement in the 1990s took the form of meetings and workshops on emergency and disaster management in the context of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).⁴ Later, the interactions in ARF evolved to include regular exercises on disaster relief, such as desktop exercises and joint exercises in the 2000s. In May 2015, for instance, China and Malaysia jointly chaired the ARF disaster relief exercise in Kedah, Malaysia.⁵

Since ASEAN developed its own regional disaster management system after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004,⁶ the China-ASEAN disaster cooperation went beyond the ARF context. The Indian Ocean tsunami was a trigger point for China to increase its support for the region to deal with disasters. In addition to providing emergency assistance, China hosted workshops and training sessions, such as the Workshop Earthquake-Generated Tsunami Warning in January 2005 in Beijing and the China-ASEAN seminar on disaster prevention and reduction in 2006.⁷ ASEAN and China signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) specifically dedicated to cooperation in disaster management in 2014, in which China pledged RMB 50 million (around US\$8 million) of grant assistance over three years to support the disaster response capacity building of ASEAN.⁸

⁴ Ministry of Defense of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense*. July 1998. www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/China-Defense-White-Paper_1998_English-Chinese.pdf.

⁵ "China Hosts Overseas Disaster Relief Exercise for the First Time." *People's Daily*, June 1, 2015. www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/China-Defense-White-Paper_1998_English-Chinese.pdf. <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0601/c98649-8900442.html>

⁶ Caballero-Anthony, Mely. "Governance of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operations" In *Negotiating Governance on Non-Traditional Security in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, 149. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

⁷ Association of Southeast Asian Nations. "China-ASEAN Workshop on Earthquake-Generated Tsunami Warning 'Action Plan to Formulate a Technology Platform for Earthquake-Generated Tsunami Warning System' Beijing, China, 25–26 January 2005." May 14, 2012. https://asean.org/?static_post=china-asean-workshop-on-earthquake-generated-tsunami-warning-action-plan-to-formulate-a-technology-platform-for-earthquake-generated-tsunami-warning-system-beijing-china-25-26-january-2005; State Council of China, "China's Actions."

⁸ Association of Southeast Asian Nations. "Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Disaster Management Cooperation." February 2018. <https://asean.org/storage/2018/02/MoU-China-ASEAN-on-DM.pdf>

Bilaterally, China has engaged ASEAN members primarily in the forms of technical support and relief assistance. One example of technical support is China's agreement with Indonesia in 2019 to collaborate in installing early warning equipment in Indonesia's earthquake-prone areas, such as Sunda Strait, West Java, Banten, and some parts of Sumatra.⁹

The Indian Ocean tsunami saw the Chinese government deploying its largest humanitarian assistance and disaster relief effort until then.¹⁰ In recent years, it is worth noting that Chinese non-governmental relief organisations have become involved in responding to disasters in Southeast Asia.

Chinese non-profit rescue teams featured in China's response to the dam collapse in southern Laos in July 2018, which provided search and rescue and initial medical treatment.¹¹ The double disasters in central Sulawesi in September 2018 saw the contribution of China's enterprises. Jingdong Indonesia, for instance, provided logistical support for Chinese rescuers participating in the relief efforts.¹² These examples represent the growing participation of Chinese non-state actors in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in Southeast Asia.



Aftermath of the double disasters in 2018 in central Sulawesi, Indonesia
(Photo Credits: Oregon State University via Flickr, under Creative Commons license)

⁹ "China, Indonesia Cooperate in Earthquake Early Warning System." *Xinhuanet*, August 16, 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/16/c_138312166.htm

¹⁰ The Information Office of the State Council of China. *China's Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction*. May 11, 2009. <https://reliefweb.int/report/china/full-text-chinas-actions-disaster-prevention-and-reduction>

¹¹ Guangyong, Sun, and Zhao Yipu. "Chinese PLA Soldiers, Volunteers and Corporations Rush to Laos to Assist after Deadly Flood." *Global Times*, August 7, 2018. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1114259.shtml>

¹² Yang, Jin. "Review of the Post-tsunami Relief Operation in Indonesia." *Indonesian Perspective*, October 24, 2018. <http://www.yidianzixun.com/article/OKMgPSMC>

Challenges and Opportunities

Disaster management in Southeast Asia has been supported by many extra-regional countries. Japan, for instance, has been the largest donor to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) since 2011, providing over US\$40 million as of 2018.¹³ The US military has also been a leading actor in responding to disasters in Asia-Pacific, including in Southeast Asia.¹⁴

In recent years, China has shown increasing interest in playing a more substantive role in this area. However, several issues have limited the progress in deepening cooperation. First, the low priority of aid work in China's diplomacy has culminated in institutional and operational limitations. The Economic and Commercial Counsellor's office in the diplomatic mission to a country/ international institution has been managing aid in the field, which usually prioritises economic and trade relations.¹⁵

The low priority of aid work has also led to China's insufficient engagement in the policymaking process related to disaster management in ASEAN, and therefore a limited understanding of the region's needs and preference for disaster cooperation.¹⁶ The grant pledged in the ASEAN-China MoU in 2014 was not disbursed when it expired in 2017. Discontinuation of discussion on the grant was cited as one reason for the unsuccessful disbursement.¹⁷

Moreover, China has yet to establish a network based in the region for aid distribution, which can expedite response during disasters. China's disaster relief supplies are usually transported to the affected countries from China. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the humanitarian supply chain have highlighted the importance of a localised network for donors.¹⁸

¹³ Shea, Will. "Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund." *The Column* 39. Accessed September 21, 2020. <https://thecolumn.ahacentre.org/posts/partnership/vol-39-japan-asean-integration-fund/>

¹⁴ Salmons, Richard. "Disaster Relief, International Status and Regional Order: A Case Study of Typhoon Haiyan." *Global Change, Peace & Security* 31, no. 3 (2019): 286. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2019.1591356>

¹⁵ Zhang, Denghua, and Graeme Smith. "China's Foreign Aid System: Structure, Agencies, and Identities." *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10 (2017): 2333. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1333419>

¹⁶ Author's interview with a former ASEAN official, Tokyo, June 2019.

¹⁷ Author's interviews with ASEAN officials, Jakarta, March 2019.

¹⁸ Cook, Alistair D. B., and Christopher Chen. "Establishing Humanitarian Lanes during COVID-19." *East Asia Forum*, June 30, 2020. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/06/30/establishing-humanitarian-lanes-during-covid-19/>

The growing number of Chinese enterprises in Southeast Asia can fill the gaps left by the limited reach of Chinese official and non-governmental relief actors. Presence in local communities can enable the enterprises to provide immediate assistance and technical support. However, compared to other multinational companies, such as DHL, which is a partner of UN and ASEAN in disaster relief,¹⁹ Chinese enterprises still lack the experience and capacity to play a substantive role in disaster relief, despite growing awareness.

New dynamics in disaster management in ASEAN has created both challenges and opportunities for China's involvement. For instance, the expansion of cash programming in emergency response raises a question on how China's preference for in-kind donations can cope with the new trend in humanitarian action? While the expanding use of humanitarian cash transfer still faces issues and controversies, it is necessary for China to factor in this trend given its interest in strengthening its aid programme.

Localisation, which emphasises the primary role of national and local actors of the affected country in responding to disasters,²⁰ has influenced the modes of disaster cooperation in Southeast Asia. This trend has been reinforced by the rise of nationalism in regional countries when it comes to accepting international humanitarian aid.²¹ As a result, partnerships with national and local actors become essential for foreign organisations to respond to disasters in the region.

This was evident in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami in Sulawesi in 2018.²² Some Chinese NGOs that responded to the double disasters were unable to contribute sufficiently due to local restrictions.²³ There were reports that several Chinese volunteers were ordered to leave the disaster zone for not having prior approval from the Indonesian government.²⁴

¹⁹ DHL. "Following Palu Earthquake and Tsunami Deutsche Post DHL Group Sends Disaster Response Team to Indonesia." October 5, 2018. <https://www.dhl.com/global-en/home/press/press-archive/2018/following-palu-earthquake-and-tsunami-deutsche-post-dhl-group-sends-disaster-response-team-to-indonesia.html>

²⁰ Cook, Alistair D. B., and Chen Christopher. "Humanitarian Action: Southeast Asia's Local Turn." *RSIS Commentary* 246 (2019). <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/humanitarian-action-southeast-asias-local-turn/#.X1NZYnkzaM8>

²¹ S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. "NTS Centre Panel Webinar on 'Humanitarian futures in the post-COVID-19 world.'" June 3, 2020. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/event/nts-centre-webinar-on-humanitarian-futures-in-the-post-covid-19-world/#.XyKJS4gzblU>

²² "Indonesia Tells Independent Foreign Aid Workers to Leave Earthquake Zone." *The Straits Times*, October 9, 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-tells-independent-foreign-aid-workers-to-leave-earthquake-zone>

²³ Author's interview with an NGO practitioner in China, online, May 2020.

²⁴ Arbi, Ivany Atina. "Government Bans Paperless Foreign Aid Workers from C. Sulawesi." *The Jakarta Post*, October 11, 2018. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/10/11/government-bans-paperless-foreign-aid-workers-from-c-sulawesi.html>

Nevertheless, localisation in disaster management can be an opportunity for China to innovate its modes of interaction with the region. Since the Chinese government and a majority of Chinese NGOs have limited experience and capacity to carry out aid projects in the field, partnership with local and national groups provide an alternative channel to contribute to relief efforts in Southeast Asian countries.

Militaries are usually among the first responders to disasters in Southeast Asia and military assistance in disaster contexts is an increasingly important component of disaster cooperation.²⁵ Enthusiasm for military cooperation with China varies from case to case in the region. In 2018, China and ASEAN held the first ever joint military exercise which included search and rescue as a component.²⁶ A Chinese medical team was deployed to the affected area in the wake of the dam collapse in Laos in 2018.²⁷ Two Chinese military aircrafts transported relief supplies to Myanmar after cyclone Komen in 2015.²⁸

However, the involvement of the military in relief operations in a foreign country is a sensitive issue and is subject to geopolitical and national security considerations. Reservations over deeper military cooperation with China still exist among Southeast Asian militaries, despite improvement in security ties. In the wake of typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, China sent the “Peace Ark” hospital ship to support the medical response. However, this deployment was only made after China was criticised for its initial donation of US\$200,000, and the maritime disputes was believed to be a main reason for the small amount of aid.²⁹ Similarly, views on cooperation with China are mixed among the Indonesian military and the differences over the Natuna Sea contributes to the reluctance for cooperation.³⁰

²⁵ Cook, Alistair D. B., and Sangeetha Yogendran. “Conceptualising Humanitarian Civil-Military Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific: (Re-)Ordering Cooperation.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 1 (2020): 36. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693498>

²⁶ Zhang, Lim Min. “First Asean-China Maritime Exercise Will Tackle Simulated Collision in Waters off Zhanjiang.” *The Straits Times*, October 24, 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/first-asean-china-maritime-exercise-will-tackle-simulated-collision-in-waters-off>

²⁷ “China-Laos Joint Medical Rescue Exercise ‘Peace Train-2018’ Kicks off.” *China Military Online*, July 26, 2018. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-07/26/content_8099406.htm

²⁸ “China’s PLA Delivers Flood Relief Supplies to Myanmar.” *Xinhuanet*, August 28, 2015. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/chinas-pla-delivers-flood-relief-supplies-myanmar>

²⁹ Salmons, Richard. “Disaster Relief, International Status and Regional Order: A Case Study of Typhoon Haiyan.” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 31, no. 3 (2019): 292, 298. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2019.1591356>

³⁰ Fitriani, Evi. “Indonesian Perceptions of the Rise of China: Dare You, Dare You Not.” *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 3 (2018): 397-398. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2018.1428677>



The Chinese military hospital ship, Peace Ark, in an exercise
(Photo Credits: U.S. Pacific Fleet via Flickr, under Creative Commons license)

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 has induced challenges and changes to disaster relief, such as travel restrictions for international aid workers, longer and more complicated customs clearance for humanitarian supplies, and social distancing in evacuation centres. The concurrence of a pandemic and a natural hazard can compound humanitarian needs and complicate disaster response, as in the case of typhoon Vongfong that hit the Philippines in mid-May 2020.³¹ While China has been active in providing medical supplies to Southeast Asian countries during COVID-19, such efforts have been independent from disaster cooperation, due to the different natures of pandemics and natural hazards. However, given the risk of concurring disasters, there is a need for China and Southeast Asia to consider such complex emergencies in future cooperation.

³¹ Don Eliseo Lucero-Prisno III, et al. "Philippines Braces for the Typhoon Season amidst COVID-19." *The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific* 1 (2020): 100003. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanwpc.2020.100003>

Recommendations

Insufficient communication has been the main issue impeding deeper cooperation between Southeast Asia and China in disaster management. To enhance mutual understanding and trust, the two sides can increase interactions at different levels so as to match the offers of assistance with the needs of the affected communities.

- (i) The Chinese diplomatic mission to ASEAN can strengthen engagement with the relevant ASEAN bodies through joint activities.

At the regional level, a focal person from China's Mission to ASEAN can be designated to engage more closely with the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management, which plays a central role in making disaster-related policies in ASEAN.

The AHA Centre and the Chinese Mission can consider having more joint events and training programmes for officials, experts, and practitioners from both sides to strengthen mutual understanding and trust. Such interactions will drive better communication between China and ASEAN on the challenges and concerns in the region and on China's value-added goods and services to meet the region's needs.

- (ii) The disaster agencies in Southeast Asian countries and China can consider online meetings to maintain regular communication.

At the bilateral level, exchanges between the disaster management agencies should be arranged regularly to ensure Southeast Asian countries and China are informed about new developments (such as institutional, legislative, and regulatory adjustments) on either side. This is particularly important in light of the changes in disaster relief induced by COVID-19 containment measures. Moreover, given the increasing use of teleconferencing during the pandemic, this mode of communication can be maintained even in the post-COVID-19 era to reduce cost and ensure efficiency in communication.

- (iii) China can improve its institutional arrangement to support its greater role in regional disaster cooperation and support the capacity-building of Chinese non-state actors for overseas operations. In China, the government can

consider (a) strengthening institutional and regulatory arrangements to consolidate and optimise official capacity to support its disaster diplomacy; (b) developing guidelines and procedures to strengthen project implementation, including post-project assessment and auditing; and (c) providing training for non-state actors (such as the potential enterprises and volunteer groups) to engage in overseas projects, operations, and activities related to disaster management in a constructive way.

- (iv) Chinese enterprises can become a bridge for disaster cooperation between Southeast Asia and China at the local level, in view of localisation of disaster relief in the region.

In Southeast Asian countries, Chinese enterprises (that are based in the host country) with the potential and willingness to contribute to disaster relief can try to open channels for maintaining dialogue with local authorities. They can also form partnerships with local NGOs and civil society groups. Such practices are valuable for developing a better understanding of the situation on the ground, so as to provide more effective assistance. Moreover, these overseas Chinese enterprises can help bridge partnerships between the non-governmental relief groups of China and ASEAN members to facilitate timely cooperation during disasters.

- (v) The scenario of double disasters of a natural hazard and a public health emergency can become a component of joint military exercises.

The COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed increased interactions between the Chinese military and some of their Southeast Asian counterparts on medical issues (such as Indonesia and Myanmar).³² Future joint military exercises between China and ASEAN and its members on disaster relief can consider including the scenario of double disasters of a natural hazard and a public health emergency.

The ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus is a possible venue for such exercises as the platform has seen meetings, workshops, and exercises related to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and military medicine. Given the importance of the military in COVID-19 response in many regional countries, it is worth considering to add a scenario of concurring pandemic and natural hazards to the cooperation.

³² Sutrisno, Budi, and Ghina Ghaliya. "COVID-19: Indonesian Military to Get Medical Equipment from China." *The Jakarta Post*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/20/covid-19-indonesian-military-to-get-medical-equipment-from-china.html>.

About the Author



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The Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre) conducts research and produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness, and building the capacity to address NTS issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre addresses knowledge gaps, facilitates discussions and analyses, engages policymakers and contributes to building institutional capacity in the following areas: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief; Climate Security and Migration. The NTS Centre brings together myriad NTS stakeholders in regular workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as provides a networking platform for NTS research institutions in the Asia Pacific through the NTS-Asia Consortium.

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