

# Helping friends in need or helping oneself? The case of China's international disaster management policy in the 2010s

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes how the People's Republic of China engages in international disaster management (IDM). The paper sets out to answer especially the question of how these activities benefit its own disaster management capabilities. In order to answer the question, the study analyzed public archival materials of news reports concerning China's bilateral and multilateral IDM activities between May 2013 and May 2018, retrieved from the China National Commission for Disaster Reduction's online database. This data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The article argues that Chinese IDM engagements are active and have a global reach, but are at the same time selective in their nature. The PRC uses IDM to position itself as a "leading developing country" through its active IDM engagements with other developing countries, while at the same time also seeking to benefit from developed countries' disaster management know-how and accepting humanitarian aid only in case of large natural disasters.

**Keywords:** *International disaster management, Humanitarian aid, China*

The way states engage in humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) and international disaster management (IDM)<sup>1</sup> has been studied from a number of perspectives. Several studies in the field of international relations have focused on what is called disaster diplomacy, where inquiry typically asks what the relation is between disasters and inter-state or intra-state conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Another line of inquiry into IDM has investigated the motivations for overseas development aid (ODA), wherein HADR activities are often included. These studies have found a number of determinants for providing aid including such matters as a common colonial past, political alliances, regional interests, recipient country size, oil exports of the recipient country, and geographical proximity. Furthermore, donated amounts do correlate with the severity of the disaster and the decisions of

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<sup>1</sup> International disaster management refers to the measures governments or private actors take in international setting to prevent and mitigate the impacts of disasters and rebuild after them. Humanitarian aid and disaster relief refer more narrowly to immediate emergency and stabilization activities when disasters occur. HADR activities are therefore part of IDM activities.

<sup>2</sup> Ilan Kelman, Catastrophe and conflict - Disaster Diplomacy and its foreign policy implications, *Brill. Res. Perspect. Dipl. Foreign Policy* 1, 1 (2016): 1–76; Ilan Kelman, Connecting theories of cascading disasters and disaster diplomacy, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2018.01.024>; Jie Zhang, 灾难外交与民族冲突解决的路径选择——以印尼和斯里兰卡为比较样本, *Pacific Journal* 19, 11 (2011); Travis Nelson, When disaster strikes: on the relationship between natural disaster and interstate conflict, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 22, 2 (2010a)

other major donor countries to donate.<sup>3</sup> Other factors include the recipient's strategic importance to the donor, and economic potential, as well as the recipient's cultural similarity, ideological stance, region,<sup>4</sup> or even donor country's size.<sup>5</sup> As for China, the PRC ODA has been accused of being 'rogue aid'<sup>6</sup>, which discards OECD DAC standards and props up dictatorships around the world. However, more recently researchers have argued that China's motivations for providing foreign aid do not differ from those of Western donors,<sup>7</sup> while others have pointed out that China at least frames its ODA activities in a different way than, for example, its East Asian neighbors Japan and South Korea, by terming its aid as 'South-South Cooperation' and as 'mutual help among developing countries.'<sup>8</sup>

More recently, a number of approaches have been added to the study of IDM, such as comparative analysis of national disaster

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<sup>3</sup> Alberto Alesina and David Dollar, Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why? *Journal of Economic Growth* 5, 1 (2000); Günther Fink and Silvia Redaelli. Determinants of International Emergency Aid—Humanitarian Need Only? *World Development* 39, 5 (2011), 741-757

<sup>4</sup> Peter Schraeder, Steven Hook and Bruce Taylor, Clarifying the Foreign Aid Puzzle: A Comparison of American, Japanese, French, and Swedish Aid Flows, *World Politics* 50, 2 (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Murad Ali, Glenn Banks and Nigel Parsons, Why Donors Give Aid and to Whom? A Critique of the Historical and Contemporary Aid Allocation Regime, *The Dialogue* 117, 2 (2015), 116-131

<sup>6</sup> Moises Naím, Rogue aid, *Foreign Policy* 159 (2007), 95–96.

<sup>7</sup> Axel Dreher and Andreas Fuchs, 'Rogue aid? An empirical analysis of China's aid allocation', *Canadian Journal of Economics* 48, 3 (2015); Tobias Broich, Do authoritarian regimes receive more Chinese development finance than democratic ones? Empirical evidence for Africa, *China Economic Review* 46, (2017), 180-207.

<sup>8</sup> Sabine Burghart, Ownership in East-Asian Aid Discourses, *Forum for Development Studies*, 44, 3 (2017)

management regimes,<sup>9</sup> and the fashionable inquiries into the soft power of states, where the relation between disaster aid and its potential to build a positive country image has been the central focus<sup>10</sup>. Also, China's motives to engage in ODA have been argued to include not only gaining economic benefits, but also supporting China's credibility as a responsible member of the international community and thereby enhancing its soft power<sup>11</sup>. Notably, Chinese scholars have also become interested in soft power and the non-traditional diplomacy features of IDM.<sup>12</sup>

However, existing studies in disaster diplomacy and ODA have some serious limitations from the point of view of studying disaster management policy. Equating ODA with HADR and IDM is problematic for a number of reasons. First, HADR requires disasters which are contingent phenomena, therefore, unlike underdevelopment, they cannot be calculated into bilateral relations beforehand, although countries may have policies on how to respond to foreign disasters in general.<sup>13</sup> Second, disasters also occur in developed countries, therefore IDM has potentially wider uses than ODA. Third, HADR can be a relatively inexpensive way

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<sup>9</sup> Kyoo-Man Ha, Four models on globalizing disaster management in the Asia-Pacific region: a comparative perspective, *The Pacific Review* 28, 2 (2015)

<sup>10</sup> Herningtyas, Ratih. Natural Disaster Management as Soft Power on Diplomacy, 筑波学院大学紀要第 13 (2018): 23-31

<sup>11</sup> James Reilly, A norm-Taker or a Norm-Maker? Chinese aid in Southeast Asia, *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, 73 (2012): 71-91

<sup>12</sup> Weizhun Mao and Qun Tianshu, 灾难外交: 一种新的外交方式? - 印度洋地震海啸启示录, *World Economics and Politics* 6 (2005); Zhangyin He and Cao Guangwei, 救灾外交的特点和功能探析, *Pacific Journal* 21, 5 (2013)

<sup>13</sup> This is pointed out by Li Xiaorui Li, 中国对外人道主义援助的特点和问题, 《现代国际关系》2012 (2)

to build bilateral relations compared to long-term ODA commitments. Unlike ODA, HADR can also take place between hostile countries, in addition, emergency aid activities in themselves are usually unconditional and do not provide opportunities for large commercial gains for the donor. Last, unlike ODA, IDM is often reciprocal activity whereby a country can improve its own disaster management capabilities. All these factors make HADR and IDM a related, but separate field to study from ODA.

Existing studies, whether they are about giving or receiving HADR<sup>14</sup>, typically leave out how IDM can influence a donor's domestic disaster management. This question is relevant since even if one accepts that international engagements in disaster management follow more general foreign policy goals and calculations of a country, such engagements do generate more than direct diplomatic gains only. This effect is visible in foreign aid in general. As, for example, Syed et al.<sup>15</sup> argue in their study about development aid and health systems, developed donor countries also learn from their engagements with developing countries and can improve their own healthcare systems in the process. In disaster management, especially when it is about the interaction between friendly countries and issues that are technical in their nature, the foreign policy dimension of IDM engagements can arguably be remote, and sectoral policy motivations much more tangible. It is also clear that different bureaucratic actors are involved in making outbound HADR

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<sup>14</sup> For the latter, see Travis Nelson, Rejecting the gift horse: international politics of disaster aid refusal, *Conflict, Security & Development* 10, 3 (2010b)

<sup>15</sup> Shamsuzzoha Syed, Viva Dadwal and Greg Martin, Reverse innovation in global health systems: towards global innovation flow, *Globalization and Health* 9, 36 (2013)

decisions and engagements that concern domestic disaster management (see below). Using China as its case, this article studies this dual logic of international disaster management by inquiring into the international dimension of an essentially domestic policy sector in order to understand what role the international plays in and for it.

While it is reasonable to assume that China currently engages in IDM to improve its own disaster management capabilities, this has not always been the case. Apart from some minor help from the Eastern bloc during the Great Leap Forward famine in 1959-1962, Mao-era disaster management forewent opportunities to receive international aid and relied on the principle of *zili-gengsheng*, or doing things on one's own. The first international disaster management engagements by the PRC as a recipient country were carried out as late as the early 1980s under Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policies, when China received Western relief aid for the first time after the 1949 revolution.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, however, China did engage in HADR activities as a donor. From the 1950s to the late 1970s, China selected the recipients of its aid on ideological grounds. In the 1950s, China also helped a number of non-socialist countries such as India, but starting in the 1960s, China limited its aid to socialist countries only. After the reform era began in 1978, China's HADR became less ideologically driven and more based on pure humanitarian considerations, and its geographic scope expanded notably.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lauri Paltmaa. *Managing Famine, Flood and Earthquake in China: Tianjin 1958-1985*. London: Routledge 2016

<sup>17</sup> Li, 中国对外人道主义援助的特点和问题; Kaibin Zhong, 中国对外人道主义援助展历程义的发, *中国减灾*·9 (2015)

A major impetus to further develop the international dimension of China's disaster management came in the years 2003 and 2004 with the SARS epidemic and the Indonesian Tsunami, which were internationally shared crises that also claimed Chinese lives<sup>18</sup>. Researchers<sup>19</sup> observed that, after 2004, China began to build a systematic international HADR organization headed by the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance, with support from other relevant units, such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 witnessed a major international relief operation towards the PRC with foreign rescue workers entering the People's Republic for the first time ever.<sup>20</sup> This further underlined the realization of the importance of disaster management in foreign policy. Probably caused by this experience, a formal inter-ministry foreign disaster aid governing system was established in 2008, leading to further activation of China's outbound HADR.

The 2010s have witnessed increased IDM engagement from China. During this decade, China's foreign policy has become more active and self-confident, yet China has been trying to keep the international community assured of its peaceful intentions. Improving its image, since 2010 China has been conducting a public diplomacy campaign aimed at improving the country's image, creating positive feelings about itself abroad and thereby

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<sup>18</sup> Hideshi Futori, Japan's Disaster Relief Diplomacy: Fostering Military Cooperation in Asia, *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, 213 (2013)

<sup>19</sup> Li, 中国对外人道主义援助的特点和问题; Zhong, 中国对外人道主义援助展历程义的发

<sup>20</sup> Yong Chen and David C. Booth. *The Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008: Anatomy of a Disaster*. (Beijing: Beijing Science Press 2011).

seeking to build its soft power.<sup>21</sup> HADR has a role to play in this, too. For example, the Chinese Government White Paper on “China’s Peaceful Development” (2011) connected China’s engagements in disaster aid to its rise on the international scene as a means to reassure the rest of the world of China’s peaceful intentions.

However, while China has become more active as an HADR donor, China is at the same time a country that frequently suffers from most types of natural hazards.<sup>22</sup> Today’s donor can quite literally turn into tomorrow’s recipient, as was powerfully demonstrated during the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. Engaging in IDM can therefore also be seen as a strategy to improve China’s domestic disaster management capabilities. An example of this can be seen in the *Common opinion from the Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council on promoting the structural reform of China’s domestic disaster management system* issued in 2017<sup>23</sup>. This policy paper has its own section on improving international disaster management co-

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<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Paltiel, Constructing global order with Chinese characteristics, *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, 4 (2011); Emilian Kavalski, The struggle for recognition of normative powers: Normative power Europe and normative power China in context, *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, 2 (2013); Heike Holbig, Ideology after the end of ideology – China and the quest for autocratic legitimation, *Democratization* 20, 1 (2013); Kerry Brown. *CEO, China – The Rise of Xi Jinping*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, White Paper on China’s Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction (2009), in *White Papers of the Chinese Government (2009-2011)*. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2012): 113-140.

<sup>23</sup> Xinhua 10.1.2017: 中共中央 国务院关于推进防灾减灾救灾体制机制改革的意见 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-01/10/c\\_1120284051.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-01/10/c_1120284051.htm), accessed 5 January 2018



operation as a way to improve domestic disaster management. According to the paper, international co-operation includes, among others, studying advanced international disaster management technologies and practices, strengthening multilateral international IDM organizations, improving international disaster management personnel training, and improving capacity to jointly respond to major natural disasters. The paper sees the United Nations (UN), Asian regional IDM structures, and China's immediate neighborhood as the focus areas for co-operation in improving China's ability to respond to its own and other's disasters.

### ***Research questions***

This study uses a method loosely based on the foreign policy analysis (FPA) approach. As its advocates note, the key question in FPA is the relation between domestic policy and foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> However, the article does not try to explain Chinese foreign policy *per se* as a typical FPA analysis would, but instead analyzes the international dimension in China's disaster management. The focus is, therefore, on the intersection of two policy sectors. Arguably, the well-documented existence of sectoral bargaining in Chinese policymaking just underlines the need to look at the domestic dimension of China's IDM activities. As argued by Lai and Kang,<sup>25</sup> foreign policymaking in China can be characterized as 'bureaucratic bargaining among sectoral agencies'. As noted above,

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<sup>24</sup> Juliet Kaarbo, A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory, *International Studies Review*, (2015); Kuniko Ashizawa, When Identity Matters: State Identity, Regional Institution-Building, and Japanese Foreign Policy, *International Studies Review* 10 (2008)

<sup>25</sup> Hongyi Lai and Su-Jeong Kang, Domestic Bureaucratic Politics and Chinese Foreign Policy, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, 86 (2014)

China's HADR organization is headed by the Ministry of Commerce and its Department of Foreign Assistance (MOFCOM/DFA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance, with participation from other units, such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and, more recently, the new China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) established in 2018. Before the April 2018 reforms and the establishment of the new Ministry of Emergency Management, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) and its China National Commission for Disaster Reduction (CNCD) had daily jurisdiction and the best technical expertise over China's overall domestic disaster management policy, although the management system was also divided by hazard type. Moreover, the Chinese Red Cross, which has a central role to play in China's in- and outbound disaster management, is basically a bureau within the MCA<sup>26</sup>. All these actors, therefore, participate in drafting and implementing China's IDM policy.

This article seeks to analyze China's outbound and inbound IDM activities and how they serve China's foreign policy and disaster management purposes. In order to answer this question, this article presents a case study on China's IDM engagements between May 2013 and May 2018. The study analyzed public archival materials on news reports concerning China's IDM activities during this period, retrieved from China National Commission for Disaster Reduction online database.<sup>27</sup> The sample contained 1359 full-text news articles about disasters and disaster management activities during that period, of which 310 were about international engagements. These 310 news articles

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<sup>26</sup> Bin Xu. *Politics of Compassion – The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*. (Stanford University Press, Stanford 2017).

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.jianzai.gov.cn/DRpublish/gjjz/00010003-1.html>

described 272 different cases of Chinese disaster management activities that had an international component to them. This data subset was read through and hand-coded based on a number of variables on the nature of China's activities, and then used for a descriptive quantitative analysis, presented below.

The data must be regarded only as a sample of China's central level state and disaster management authorities' IDM activities during the period since it is reasonable to assume that not all engagements from this period were reported in the database, just the ones that touched the CNCDD or its associated organizations. For example, China's memberships in different international humanitarian organizations, unless they were enacted during the period, fall out of the analysis. The sample tells who China's central level disaster management experts see as important enough to interact with and on what kind of topics. The use of news articles has the notable advantage of enabling us to analyze how many concrete disaster management-related activities that had an international dimension took place during this period, with whom, and what kind. Through this, we can discern what Kaarbo calls "patterns rooted in discrete actions" of China's IDM policy<sup>28</sup>.

In its conclusion, this article argues that the PRC uses IDM in its foreign policy to position itself as a "leading developing country". In this role, China engages actively in donor activities towards developing countries. At the same time, China seeks to benefit from developed countries' disaster management scientific know-how, but less from their material or financial assistance. IDM engagements are therefore used to reduce China's own vulnerabilities to natural hazards through seeking to improve China's disaster management-related technology and scientific

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<sup>28</sup> Juliet Kaarbo, *A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory*, 194

knowledge. In this, China can be said to be acting more like a developed country, regardless of its developing country rhetoric. Below, the article goes through an empirical analysis of China's IDM engagements, first by looking into their overall outlay in the period, and then looking in more detail into engagements from the point of view of China's role as a donor and a recipient of assistance, as well as China's engagement in reciprocal IDM exchanges. This is followed by a short conclusion.

### ***Overall characteristics of China's IDM engagement***

A key variable used to classify China's IDM engagements in this study was whether they contained donating, receiving, or exchanging disaster management-related services, goods and/or information. Overall, China's IDM engagement had a clear emphasis on reciprocal exchanges. Over two-thirds of the cases (68.2%) could be classified as having this characteristic, while in 27.3% of the cases China was the donor, and in 4.1% cases a recipient.<sup>29</sup> This can be read partly as a result of the observation period, which did not contain any major disasters in terms of the number of victims in China itself, although, for example, a number of floods, typhoons, and earthquakes did occur there each year. From this one can infer that China's own threshold for asking for direct international relief aid seems to be rather high.

With whom does China then engage in its IDM activities? In the overall picture, 53.5% of cases involved partner(s) from developing countries, 30.6% of cases involved developed countries, while 44.6% involved international organizations,<sup>30</sup> mostly the UN,

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<sup>29</sup> The shares do not add up to 100% because some of the cases could not be classified according to this scheme.

<sup>30</sup> The percentages add up to over 100 % because of the overlapping cases in the sample. Here the membership of the OECD was regarded

which was somehow involved in 34.7% of all China's IDM interactions in the sample. Chinese IDM activities can, therefore, be said to have a slight emphasis on developing countries over the developed ones. This is not surprising due to the higher number of developing countries, their societies' higher vulnerability to natural hazards, and higher propensity to ask for disaster aid.<sup>31</sup> Yet, with a further breakdown of the data shown below, the nature of engagements is qualitatively quite different concerning the two groups of countries. Overall, as the figures indicate, Chinese IDM activities are rather extensive in their reach.

As for the types of disasters, 49.1% of the cases dealt with general disaster management issues not related to any specific type of hazard. As of the news articles where the type of hazard was specified, 18.5% of them concerned meteorological hazards, such as typhoons, and also climate change, which was increasingly mentioned towards the end of the observation period. A less, but still a notable number (6.3%) of engagements dealt with floods or hydrological hazard-related water management issues, and 9.9% with earthquakes. The rest of the cases dealt with other types of hazards and activities, such as smog, epidemics, forest fires, and search & rescue exercises. In general, China's IDM engagements are directed towards general disaster management issues, but also emphasize hazard types of which it has its own experience historically.

At what point of the disaster management cycle does China then prefer to engage in IDM? 26.6% of cases were concerned with

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as the criterion for the developed-developing country classification - apart from Mexico, Chile and Turkey, which are OECD members, but which OECD itself defines as "emerging countries". <http://www.oecd.org/about/membersandpartners/>

<sup>31</sup> Nelson, Rejecting the gift horse

all phases of the disaster management cycle. In 29.2% of cases, the theme was only disaster prevention, while a further 15.5% combined this theme with emergency action. 22.5% focused solely on emergency and relief activities after a hazard event. Notably, only 1.1% of articles dealt exclusively with reconstruction. The latter phase is, of course, the most costly, least spectacular, and can drag on for a long time. China clearly prefers prevention and emergency help over reconstruction in its IDM engagements.

As for the type of engagement, there is a clear emphasis on disaster-related natural sciences and technological solutions. 39.5% of all engagements in the sample included mentions of disaster management technologies and natural science, and almost 1/5 dealt with remote-sensing and satellite technology. As will become clearer in the closer analysis of the data below, these news articles were mostly about scientific conferences on disaster management-related issues where China was both receiving and promoting its own scientific achievements. Yet, China also emphasized technological solutions in many of the bilateral cases where it was a donor. Arguably, Chinese IDM seems to subscribe to the notion that natural disasters are something that should be tackled with natural sciences and technology first, and therefore the “scientization” of disaster management, as it is called by Hollis<sup>32</sup>, is clearly visible in China’s IDM engagement. “Soft” topics, such as post-disaster psychological counseling, were almost missing (1 case out of 272) in the news articles.

### *China as a donor*

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<sup>32</sup> Simon Hollis, The global standardization of regional disaster risk management, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, 2 (2014): 330

The cases where China could be identified as a donor can be seen as cases that had high diplomatic value for China's foreign relations, but low value for domestic disaster management. In 90.5% of these cases, the recipients were developing countries, and only 4% of cases reported Chinese reaction to a disaster in an industrial nation. China's aid to developing countries consisted of 47.3% material aid, such as tents, blankets or radios; 39.2% cash donations; and 28.4% food aid. In 21% of cases, China dispatched a rescue team to help in the emergency. In addition, China trained disaster management personnel from developing countries (29.8% of cases) and provided those countries with helpful information; such as satellite data (21.6% of cases).

As for developed countries (mostly Japan), China's 'aid' typically entailed sending official messages of consolation to the victims of disasters, therefore constituting only rhetoric action. Such international disaster talk can have political costs and benefits, but this type of aid does not bind its producer to anything and is virtually free to produce, unlike concrete relief aid which, according to this sample, China reserves for developing countries. During the observation period, the CNCD website also contained a number of news articles about disasters occurring in developed countries, but did not mention China's action about them. However, similar news about disasters in developing countries was normally accompanied by news about China's relief efforts in those countries. One reason accounting for this is that developed countries are less likely to call for relief aid through the UN or other channels than the developing countries are involved with,<sup>33</sup> yet it is not unknown for a developed country to call for international help, such as the US after the Hurricane Katrina in

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<sup>33</sup> Nelson, *Rejecting the gift horse*

2004, Japan after the triple disaster in 2011, and Sweden during the great forest fires in 2018.

In terms of types of disaster, about 1/3 of China's donations targeted countries that had suffered from meteorological hazards and disasters, mostly typhoons, 14.9% dealt with floods and other hydrological hazards, and 20.3% with earthquakes. Nearly 63.9% of China's donor engagements during this period were about the emergency phase, while preventive action could be detected in 1/4 of the cases. Reconstruction was mentioned in 12.5% of the cases, usually in connection to the other phases of the disaster management cycle. China's donor activities can, therefore, be said to be characterized mostly by emergency aid to developing countries in the types of disasters that PRC disaster management authorities also have experienced at home.

Geographically, a large part of the cases (39.2%) of China's aid targeted Africa, but China was also notably active in its own neighborhood, as 28.49% of its activities targeted its immediate neighbors, such as North Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, while a further 13.5% of cases targeted other Asian countries. The fourth largest regional target group was South and Central America, which was involved in 8.1% of the cases. It can be argued that China's donor activities follow its general economic activity in different regions of the developing world, especially in Africa, while through its donor activities, China also tries to show its nature as a good neighbor to countries that share its border.

China is a member of a number of international humanitarian aid and disaster management organizations, such as the International Red Cross. However, this does not translate into active donor policy through them. Only in 5.5% of cases, China made a commitment of concrete assistance to a multilateral organization, such as providing a number of African countries with meteorological equipment through a WMO project to enhance



African countries' disaster prevention capabilities. However, it should be noted that in 27% of cases, the news articles mentioned China as acting as a part of a larger UN-coordinated relief operation. In these cases, however, there was typically only one recipient for China's aid, and it was China's own decision to donate so the relationship can be said to have been essentially bilateral, although it was coordinated with other donors. This normally happens through the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).<sup>34</sup> China seems to be quite reluctant to contribute materials, food or cash to multilateral organizations, as such activities were mentioned only in 1-2% in all of these categories. Again, these findings can be compared to Reilly's finding that China has been reluctant to join donor-organized consortia in its ODA practices.<sup>35</sup>

### *China as a recipient*

The cases where China could be identified as a recipient of aid can arguably be seen as cases that had lower diplomatic value for China, but higher value for domestic disaster management. Only 11 news articles (4.1%) were about China clearly receiving relief aid or assistance. Although the number is small, it still can give us some interesting insights into China's IDM engagements, especially the way they are used as a part of China's own disaster management regime. Here, information seems to be the key, as 72.7% of the cases were about China receiving information about disaster conditions or disaster management practices. 45.5% of cases were about receiving satellite data on earthquake damages,

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<sup>34</sup> Nelson, *Rejecting the gift horse*

<sup>35</sup> Reilly, *A norm-Taker or a Norm-Maker?*

which China acquired through UN-SPIDER cooperation.<sup>36</sup> This also explains the high association of the UN (54.5%) with these cases. Monetary support to earthquake reconstruction was mentioned in only one case (from the World Bank); the same is true for food aid (from Pakistan for Chinese flood victims). 81.8% of news was about the emergency phase, and 63.6% was about earthquakes.

However, here one needs to note that the magnitude 7.0 Lushan earthquake that hit Sichuan in April 2013 fell just outside of the survey period (May 2013- May 2018) of this study. Because of the Lushan earthquake disaster, China did accept 62.11 million Yuan worth of humanitarian aid from the International Red Cross and this relief aid came from countries such as the U.S., Australia, Japan, Canada, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Spain.<sup>37</sup>

The picture that emerges is that China mostly asks for foreign assistance only concerning major earthquakes, but even then depending on the severity of the disaster, Chinese authorities prioritize gaining scientific data through the UN over material relief aid. If such aid is asked for, the ICR is the preferred partner. While disaster data has its role in strengthening China's disaster management capabilities, China nevertheless seems to be underutilizing resources available in the global IDM community and her threshold to ask for direct international relief

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<sup>36</sup> UN-SPIDER is a UN platform which facilitates the use of space-based technologies for disaster management and emergency response.

<sup>37</sup> Zhongguo Hong shizi bao 5.12.2015: 拉近中国与世界的距离—“九大”以来中国红十字会对外交往工作回顾,

<http://www.redcross.org.cn:8402/miropaper/article.aspx?aid=1272&ty=zghszbkzk>, accessed 15 May 2019

help seems to be rather high. This closer resembles behavior of a developed country than that of a developing one; a general difference between these two types of countries that has been noted by Nelson.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, most of the disaster management gains that China gets from IDM actually come through reciprocal engagements.

### *Reciprocal Engagements*

As noted above, most of China's IDM engagements were reciprocal in their nature. In these cases, diplomatic and disaster management gains varied case by case. News items about reciprocal engagements were mostly about conferences, training exercises, meetings, and official visits of disaster management authorities (jointly 98% of reciprocal cases). Most reciprocal interactions took place in multilateral settings (56.8%). 85.9% of the cases were about information exchanges, not only on disaster management technology, but also on such things as information on participants' disaster management practices, policies, and organizational features. All this can strengthen the disaster management capabilities of all parties involved. 44.9 % of reciprocal cases mentioned disaster management technology and science, while a notable part (16.2%) of cases included the joint training of Chinese and partner countries' disaster management personnel. These reciprocal interactions were mostly technical in their nature and can, therefore, be said to have directly benefitted China's domestic disaster management capabilities by enabling Chinese disaster management experts to learn from international practices and technology. Furthermore, 30 cases (16.1%) mentioned signing disaster management-related agreements between PRC and other parties. Such agreements have a

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<sup>38</sup> Nelson, *Rejecting the gift horse*

diplomatic dimension by their very nature, but they also help in strengthening China's own disaster management capabilities.

As for the type of disasters, most of the reciprocal interactions (65.9%) dealt with general disaster management issues and did not mention a specific hazard type. The most pronounced hazard type was meteorological hazards (16.8%), while earthquakes (4.2%) and floods (2.7%) gained much less attention. This is interesting when compared to the prevalence of these types of hazards in China and also in China's own donor profile. Yet, the result is understandable in light of the fact that a large part of the reciprocal interactions was about general disaster management technologies and practices. For example, satellites and remote sensing (mentioned in 17.8% of cases) can be used to monitor both earthquake and flood damages. Notably, 10.3% of the news articles mentioned global warming/climate change, and the frequency of such news has been on the rise since 2015. China's growing commitment to international efforts against climate change was, therefore, also visible in this data.

As for the disaster management cycle phases found in reciprocal exchanges, 32.5% of the news mentioned themes that were related to the whole cycle of disaster management. 30.8% focused on prevention and preparedness only, and an additional 19.5% also included emergency rescue (but not reconstruction). Reconstruction was only discussed in 1% of the cases. The general impression is, therefore, that China uses reciprocal IDM engagements to enhance its and other participants' resilience to disasters, mostly by seeking to improve its scientific and technological capacities and training its disaster management personnel, while reconstruction issues are left to lesser attention. Preventive scientific and technological exchanges, therefore, came to the forefront in reciprocal interactions.

Geographically, reciprocal engagements involved an international organization, especially the UN, in 42.7% of the cases, while the second largest group (26.5%) was the different collective variations of Asia-Pacific regional organizations (such as ASEAN), or more *ad hoc* groups of countries from the same region. An additional 21.6% of reciprocal engagements took place with China's immediate neighbors, such as the China-Korea-Japan tripartite cooperation in disaster management, which has been going on since 2011. This underlines Giessmann's observation of how disaster management is one of the few fields where common interests exist in East Asia so much that countries there have been able to overcome their historical and political difficulties in generating regional cooperation.<sup>39</sup>

Asia can, therefore, be said to be the most important regional reference group for the PRC in terms of the frequency of its reciprocal activities. Notably, while African countries are the largest recipient group of China's bilateral donor activities, only about 1% of exchanges took place between China and African countries only, individually or collectively. Identified European countries were involved in 12.9% of exchanges and other countries (mostly the US) in 11.4% of them.

Notable for the way China used IDM for its geopolitical purposes, 4.3% of the reported cases concerned engagement within China's "own" international organizations or initiatives, namely the One Belt One Road (BRI) and the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO). While their share cannot be regarded as large, it was on the rise towards the end of the observation period and

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<sup>39</sup> Hans Giessmann, Regionalism and crisis prevention in (Western) Europe and (Eastern) Asia: a systematic comparison, *Asia Pacific Review* 14, 2 (2007)

showed once again that there is a direct connection between China's diplomatic geopolitical initiatives and IDM activities.

Reciprocal exchanges also had a soft power function for China. In this vein, China's global IDM talk tried to reassure its audiences about the peaceful nature of China's rise. At the same time, China directed its IDM talk at developing countries to reinforce China's image as a benevolent leader of this bloc in world politics. For example, in an article about China's remote sensing satellites, it was argued that China's willingness to contribute disaster-related data both to the developed and developing countries not only improved these countries' disaster management capabilities, but also demonstrated how China was acting in a manner fulfilling the responsibilities of a "developing major nation".<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in a 2017 article that described how China has been training representatives from BRI countries in climate change issues, the Chinese chair was cited as noting how organizing such training was part of China's shouldering of its "great power responsibility".<sup>41</sup>

### ***Conclusions***

In the 2010s, China has developed its IDM activities in an increasingly systematic manner by incorporating them into its foreign policy, while at the same time utilizing IDM to improve its own disaster management capabilities. These developments generally reflect PRC's rising status in the international

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<sup>40</sup> Renmin wang 13.10.2014: 国际减灾救灾中国卫星显身手, <http://www.jianzai.gov.cn//DRpublish/gjjz/0000000000006449.html>, accessed 5 January 2018

<sup>41</sup> Fazhan-gaigewei wangzhan 24.4.2017: "一带一路"国家应对气候变化培训班在京举行, <http://www.jianzai.gov.cn//DRpublish/gjjz/00000000000023051.html> , accessed 5 January 2018

community, where China is seeking a position that would fit its newly-found posture. Through its IDM activities, China is playing a middle role between the developed and developing countries by positioning itself as a, or even *the*, leading developing country, while at the same time using developed countries as a benchmark and useful source of disaster management expertise and technology. This finding is in line, for example, with China's regional forum diplomacy as analyzed by Alden and Alves, who argue that China's involvement in regional organizations in the developing world is closely linked to its aim of furthering its leadership role in the global south,<sup>42</sup> while Burghart makes a similar observation about China's ODA rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> Active IDM engagements bring another opportunity for this.

However, while IDM activities help China, the findings point to China's lingering preference to *zili-gengsheng*, handling difficult situations on its own, which is probably related to the party-state's tendency to frame disaster aid as its 'gift' to the people,<sup>44</sup> and to regard disasters as potential crises which may affect state's moral legitimacy.<sup>45</sup> Asking for foreign assistance does not fit well in any of these frames, yet there are not similar political costs related to asking for scientific information, which could explain why China is such a selective recipient of IDM aid. Chinese IDM engagements are, therefore, active and have a global reach, but could draw more

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<sup>42</sup> Chris Alden and Ana Cristina Alves, China's Regional Forum Diplomacy in the Developing World: Socialisation and the 'Sinosphere', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, 103 (2017)

<sup>43</sup> Burghart, Ownership in East-Asian Aid Discourses

<sup>44</sup> Christian Sorace. *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Xu, *Politics of Compassion*

to available resources in the international disaster management community.

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