

# China-India Brief

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## *Guest Column*

# Elevating Regional Status Through Disaster Relief: China's Approach and Challenges

By Lina Gong

Cooperation in disaster management provides a convenient avenue for external powers such as China to court friendships with Southeast Asian states and enhance their status in regional security, due to the region's vulnerability to disasters. China's engagement with ASEAN and its member states on disaster issues has developed in line with its evolving strategic goals in the region—from ending self-imposed isolation in the late 1990s, building a benign image in the 2000s, to

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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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presently striving for greater achievements under President Xi Jinping. Against this backdrop, China has been pursuing a higher status for itself in the regional security architecture by strengthening disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asian states. This essay will assess China's success in this endeavour.

### **China's Status Aspiration and Disaster Diplomacy**

In President Xi's tenure, China's interest in establishing a more distinctive security partnership with Southeast Asia has become increasingly evident. When addressing the Indonesian Parliament in 2013, he highlighted China's joint efforts with regional organisations, such as ASEAN, in dealing with security challenges. In the same year, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang suggested that China and ASEAN formalise the informal Defence Ministers' Meeting. This was followed by a proposal in 2016 for an exclusive joint military exercise between ASEAN member states and China.

In disaster relief, China has sought to deepen security partnerships with regional states at multilateral and bilateral level. The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) is the primary platform where the Chinese military collectively engages with its Southeast Asian counterparts. It volunteered to co-chair with Vietnam for the first ADMM Plus Expert Working Group (EWG) on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) between 2011 and 2014. The grouping established new mechanisms and

workplans that laid the foundation for greater HADR cooperation. A proactive posture in this platform provided opportunities for China to influence the intangible dimension of military disaster relief cooperation in the region.

In bilateral contexts, deployment of military assets is a way to differentiate China's disaster relief efforts. After Cyclone Komen in Myanmar in 2015 and the dam collapse in Laos in 2018, China was among the leading responders, deploying a number of military assets to support the relief efforts. Beijing's friendly relations with these two countries facilitated the deployment of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to deliver assistance following these disasters.

By contrast, China's role in disaster relief, particularly its use of military assets, has been more subdued in other parts of the region. In response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, the Chinese government initially offered a small amount of aid, which drew strong international criticism. Subsequently, it provided additional aid, including sending military medical teams and a single military hospital ship. Nevertheless, the Philippines reportedly rejected some of Beijing's offers and only accepted the deployment of a non-governmental search and rescue team from China. In the wake of the earthquake and tsunami in Palu, Indonesia in 2018, dozens of countries deployed military assets to assist in logistics, but China did not. Instead, a chartered civilian aircraft of China Postal Airlines was used to deliver Chinese aid to the affected area.

Beijing's haphazard bilateral engagement with individual Southeast Asian countries has resulted in disparate views of China's viability as a security provider for the region. While some countries have accepted the rising power as a key security partner, others are clearly more hesitant, and view the deployment of Chinese military assets around their territories with suspicion.

### **Southeast Asia's Responses: Calculus and Means**

In addition to China's own endeavours, Southeast Asia's responses perhaps play a more important role in shaping China's status in the region. Disaster relief cooperation in Southeast Asia serves two main purposes—maintaining ASEAN's relevance in regional security through engagement with external powers and drawing on external expertise and resources to build individual and collective capacities to deal with disasters.

Strategic considerations require Southeast Asia to have an inclusive approach to external powers. The membership of ADMM Plus is an example of this approach, which includes major partners of Southeast Asian security. To preserve the appeal of ASEAN-centred mechanisms as relatively neutral platforms, ASEAN tries to avoid showing preferential treatment to any individual partner. For example, mechanisms for the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM) were separately established with China and Japan on the same day (October 14, 2021), while a similar mechanism with

South Korea was made the following year. ASEAN agreed to China's suggestion on a joint maritime exercise in 2018, and later carried out similar exercises with the United States in September 2019 and with India in May 2023. These steps show that ASEAN actively tried to avoid giving the impression that it was taking sides with any of these powers while partially accommodating China's status pursuit.

A similar approach has been seen in bilateral interactions. The Philippines agreed to the deployment of a Chinese military hospital ship after Typhoon Haiyan even though bilateral relations were severely strained at the time by the South China Sea disputes. Vietnam continued to engage with the United States to enhance its disaster response capabilities while maintaining good relations with China and cooperating with India on HADR issues.

Regional normative preferences and ASEAN's institutional design has enabled the grouping to shape the outcome of China's status pursuit from a position of relative weakness. With non-interference as the underlying principle of regional affairs, each member state has absolute authority to shape how external powers get involved in the relief effort when a disaster strikes.

Multilateral platforms such as ADMM Plus allow ASEAN to shape and propagate important norms and practices related to military HADR in the region. The chairpersonship of ADMM Plus rotates among ASEAN member states, and the working groups are co-led by an ASEAN



member state and an external power. This modality of cooperation ensures that ASEAN takes the lead in agenda-setting and operation of these institutions, and is able to respond collectively to the different policy goals of external powers.

In addition, control over the rules of engagement within the ADMM Plus allows ASEAN to ensure that interactions with external powers favour the region's interest. In response to China's proposal to formalise the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers Meeting, ASEAN updated the ADMM documents, reaffirming the informal nature of the ADMM+1 meetings and capping the number of meetings to two per year.

## Conclusion

China's disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asia is increasingly active at the regional level, evidenced by its institutionalised engagement with ASEAN entities and its willingness to lead HADR work under ASEAN-centred institutions. These are manifestations of China's status as a key security partner and provider in multilateral contexts. However, its quest for distinctive security partnerships has made little progress, with bilateral military HADR cooperation being perceived differently by regional countries and only those that maintain friendly relations with China accepting it as a security partner in military terms. Southeast Asia's response is an important factor that determines the

success of China's pursuit through disaster relief cooperation. Norms and multilateral institutions have enabled Southeast Asian countries to collectively negotiate with the more powerful external power over its status in the region.

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