

China-India Brief

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Image Credit: New Zealand Defence Force, Grant Armishaw

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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India's Evolving Disaster Relief Cooperation with Southeast Asia

By Dhanasree Jayaram

India's longstanding experience in disaster relief cooperation with its South and Southeast Asian neighbours (and beyond) is leading it to seek the status of a 'net security provider' in the region. Although India's activities in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) gained international attention during its efforts in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, its HADR engagement with Southeast Asian countries can actually be traced back to the 1990s, as part of its Look East Policy (LEP). With the transformation of the LEP to Act East Policy (AEP), this cooperation has been further revitalised.

While the Southeast Asian nations see India as an important HADR partner, there continues to be challenges and gaps in the relationship that prevent India from becoming a full-fledged 'net security provider' for the region. However, as India's disaster relief cooperation broadens and strengthens with individual Southeast Asian countries, as well as multilateral organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quad, its image as a reliable and preferred security partner in the region will be enhanced.

India's Strengths in Disaster Relief Cooperation with Southeast Asia

In material terms, India's biggest strength is



Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Ministry of Defence of India

its military when it comes to disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asia. Following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that affected both South and Southeast Asian nations, India conducted one of its largest multinational HADR operations alongside its partners, the United States, Australia, and Japan (that later went on to become the Quad), in which its military was a leading actor. Since then, it has emerged as a major HADR partner for the region's countries. This is also partly attributable to the institutionalisation of its HADR engagement with the region through the establishment of the **Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff** (HQ-IDS) and the Defence Crisis Management Group (DCMG) that coordinate these activities. This is evident in the way it has provided support to countries such as the Philippines (for example, 2013 Typhoon Haiyan and 2018 double disaster in Indonesia due to earthquake and tsunami).

In order to strengthen its partnership with Southeast Asian countries, India has focussed on not only enhancing post-disaster relief and rescue cooperation with the region, but also improving its disaster preparedness through bilateral and multilateral exercises primarily led by the military. On the one hand, it is an integral part of several ASEAN-centred disaster management-related mechanisms such as the **ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) Work Programme** and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), which has been acknowledged by ASEAN countries as critical to the ASEAN-India strategic partnership. On the other hand, individual ASEAN members have been invited and integrated into several multilateral platforms/initiatives led by India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Milan, an annual multilateral naval exercise hosted by the Indian Navy.

There has been an uptick in the number of bilateral HADR exercises between India and some of the ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, which are aimed at enhancing capacity-building, especially among militaries, by improving interoperability, personnel training, and sharing of knowledge and technological know-how. In some cases, the individual ASEAN countries' foreign policy and strategic imperatives also shape their partnerships with India, at the core of which, HADR lies along with other security concerns.

For example, Chinese actions in the South China Sea have influenced India-Vietnam defence and security relations in a significant manner. In 2022, the **People's Army of Vietnam** conducted a field training exercise (VINBAX) with the Indian army as a part of India-Vietnam multiagency (bilateral) HADR exercise held in India—the first time that it did so with a foreign army.

What is equally critical in India's disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asian countries is its normative engagement with them. India has consistently been resistant to interventionist approaches to HADR operations. With Southeast Asian countries, too, India has largely adhered to the rules and norms of engagement of the disaster-affected country while deploying military assets to carry out rescue and relief operations. It has therefore portrayed itself to be different from the Western countries that endorsed the application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle on Myanmar when it rejected international aid following Cyclone Nargis in 2008. India along with the ASEAN countries and a few others such as China did not favour the R2P approach in the case of disaster relief. Instead, it chose the path of "**capacity-building and closed-door diplomacy**" to accommodate the Myanmar regime's interests and win its trust. This form of non-interventionist approach has helped India build stronger partnerships with the Southeast Asian countries.

Gaps and Challenges in India's Disaster Relief Cooperation with Southeast Asia

Even though India's disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asian nations has grown manifold and has led to the deepening of security ties, there remain several shortcomings and challenges. Although India has so far been lauded for its quick, coordinated, and timely response to disasters in the region, it still has limited capabilities to launch a large-scale HADR operation in the broader Indo-Pacific region (if not in the IOR). For a long time, India was seen as a reluctant power that was unwilling to take up any burden-sharing on issues concerning global or regional governance. However, with the shifts in India's approach, driven especially by its desire to be seen as a **'responsible power'** over the past decade, this perception has begun to change in Southeast Asia.

The challenge remains as to how some of the existing regional forums and mechanisms, including IONS and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)—which include some Southeast Asian countries and have been focussing on HADR as an area of cooperation—can be made more effective. A more formalised regional cooperation framework, which does not merely depend on irregular HADR exercises and ad-hoc informal exchanges, could bring continuity and greater tangible outcomes to India-Southeast Asia disaster relief cooperation.

Another challenge for India is to balance

between its bilateral partnerships and multilateral engagement with ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS), all of which, involves interactions with China, with whom its relations have soured dramatically over the past few years. India remains sceptical of any multilateral frameworks in the region that are perceived to be China-led or dominated, as seen by its decision to opt out of the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)** in 2020. At the same time, in terms of bilateral partnerships, it does not have the same level of cooperation with all Southeast Asian countries. Historical, cultural, and geopolitical/geostrategic factors have led India to have much closer relations with countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam, while its ties with others in the region could be further improved.

Another critical missing element in India's disaster relief approach(es) is civilian engagement. Its HADR operations and exercises are primarily led by the military, leading to a huge gap in civil-military engagement that is crucial for HADR in general, and more specifically within the ASEAN disaster management-related institutional mechanisms and individual Southeast Asian countries. A country like India, with massive human resources and technical expertise in disaster preparedness, needs to more formally and systematically integrate its civilian agencies and organisations into its external HADR policies and strategies. The **National Disaster Response Force (NDRF)**,

“a specialized force created by the Ministry of Home Affairs, under the 2005 Disaster Management Act” for disaster response, is being gradually integrated into India’s external HADR activities, including in Southeast Asia.

India’s Future HADR Role in Southeast Asia

To a certain extent, India’s engagement with the Quad gives it a means to share the experiences and capacities of the other three countries that have been more active in regional HADR in Southeast Asia. For the Quad, HADR is a focal area of cooperation, which is evidenced by the coming into effect of the **Guidelines for the Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indo-Pacific**.

India has a crucial role to play in maintaining ASEAN centrality in the many initiatives that are expected to be launched under this partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

India’s HADR efforts in Southeast Asia thus far have been largely lauded by its partners and the disaster-affected countries. Yet its aspiration to be viewed as a **“net security provider in the Indo-Pacific”** requires it to take a proactive, multi-actor, multi-sectoral, and institutionalised burden-sharing approach to HADR cooperation with Southeast Asia and beyond.

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News Reports

Bilateral relations

To counter China, India will add US\$5 billion aircraft carrier to its navy fleet

South China Morning Post, November 29

The new carrier, which can hold at least 28 fighter jets, will be flying the French Rafale jets, according to people familiar with the matter.

India's 'Dragon Squad' Jaguar Fighter Jets Practice Maritime Strike Mission Near China Chokepoint

The EurAsian Times, November 25

The exercise aimed to counterbalance China's growing presence in the surrounding waters.

India Chides China for Bullying at Sea: 'Clear and Present Danger'

Newsweek, November 19

"The fragile security situation in the South China Sea, where the growing number of instances of bullying of smaller navies, including fishermen, by the Chinese militia or its navy...poses a clear and present danger to the good order and discipline at sea," said Admiral Hari Kumar, the Indian Navy's top uniformed officer.

China and India in the Region

In the Israel-Hamas war, China and India walk opposite sides of the same fine line

NBC, November 22

The two countries are both trying to balance their relations with Israel and the Palestinians but have responded to the conflict in different ways.

US-China military talks: A turning point for India's strategic calculus?

India Today, November 20

The highly anticipated meeting between US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping is not just a bilateral matter but has profound implications for India.

Maldives asks India to withdraw military, expected to 'facilitate more independent and equal diplomacy'

Global Times, November 19

This request is seen by some Chinese analysts as a brave step forward for a more independent and equal diplomacy as well as inclusive and mutually beneficial cooperation with more countries, including China.

China, Pakistan wrap up naval drill featuring sub, high-tech destroyer

Defense News, November 18

The Chinese and Pakistani Navies have undertaken a first-of-its-kind joint patrol in the Arabian Sea, consolidating increased Chinese naval presence in the waters surrounding the Indian peninsula.

Trade and Economy

India-China trade data discrepancy rises to \$15 billion in January-October this year

The Indian Express, November 26

There were 896 cases of under-valuation detected last year.

China's Rice Exports to Ivory Coast Top 2022 After India Curbs

Bloomberg, November 23

China exported more rice to the Ivory Coast in the three months through October than in the whole of 2022 after India restricted shipments of the grain, with those curbs likely to extend into next year.

India confirms subsidies for Apple supplier Foxconn, Lenovo and 25 other tech hardware firms, bolstering country's electronics supply chain ambitions

South China Morning Post, November 20

Under India's Production Linked Incentive Scheme, a total investment of US\$360 million has been approved for subsidies.

India, 13 other IPEF members sign deal to cut dependence on China

Fortune India, November 16

This initiative will contribute to regional economic development, ultimately reducing their dependence on China.

Energy and Environment

India plans to triple underground coal mining to meet energy demand

Financial Times, November 26

India's coal ministry has outlined plans to triple output from underground coal mines by 2028 to meet the country's fast-growing energy needs despite international pressure to phase down the use of polluting fossil fuels.

China-Plus-One Strategy powers up India's exports in solar modules

Business Standard, November 19

In the first half of FY24, solar cells and modules exported from India were worth Rs 8,307 crore, a multi-fold growth from Rs 1,453 crore in the same period a year ago, according to data from rating agency Icria.

Annual growth of 23% and \$345 billion investment drive Asian dominance

Times of India, November 16

India's growth in renewable capacity surpasses that of coal power, while China emerged as the fastest-growing deployer of wind and solar globally between 2000 and 2022.

China's renewable energy boom powers global job surge, report says

Radio Free Asia, November 16

Making up the world's largest energy workforce, China's clean energy sector constitutes about 60% of the nation's total energy workforce, a ten percent-point increase since 2019.

Analyses

India is making too many disasters in the Himalayas

Channel News Asia, November 25

By Mihir Sharma, Director of the Centre for Economy and Growth Programme at the Observer Research Foundation.

The Indian government's increasing rush to build at high altitude is endangering lives and an irreplaceable ecosystem.

It's time to upgrade India-Korea defence cooperation

The Sunday Guardian, November 19

By Lakhvinder Singh, Director of Peace & Security Studies at the Asia Institute in Seoul.

China's increasingly assertive foreign policy, economic clout, and expansive military presence should be a sign for India and South Korea the importance of enhancing their defence cooperation to effectively maintain the status quo, peace, and stability in the region.

The US-China truce: Where India needs to assess the changes in great power relations

Indian Express, November 17

By C. Raja Mohan, Senior Fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute, Delhi

India's own rise in the international system allows it to effectively handle any sudden shifts in great power relations. Nevertheless, as the American and Chinese Presidents meet in San Francisco, what areas should it pay attention to?

America should aim for competitive coexistence with China

Financial Times, November 16

By Joseph Nye, Emeritus Professor at Harvard University

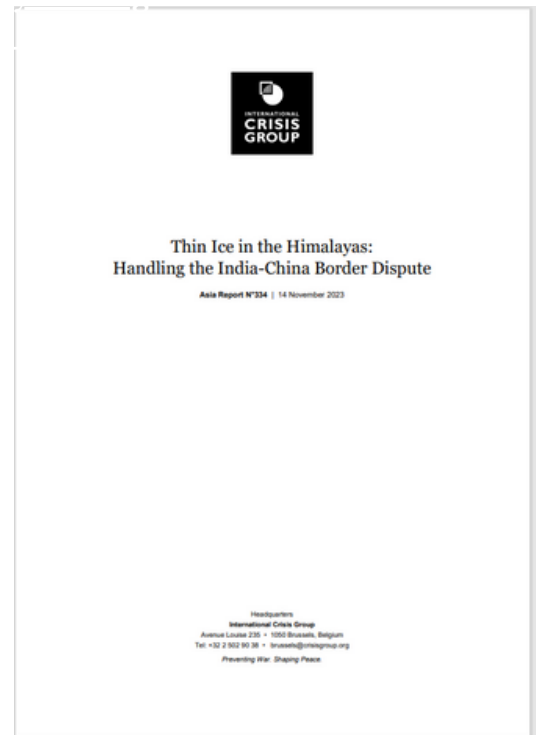
The relationship between the two superpowers is fraught but manageable if the US plays its cards right.

Books and Journals

Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute

International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 334, November 2023

A deadly clash on the India-China frontier in 2020 has caused a fundamental shift in relations between the two Asian giants. Anxieties arising from competition for influence in South Asia and globally have spilled over into their border dispute, fuelling military build-ups and heightening the risk of fresh fighting. Nationalist governments in both countries are hardening their stance on the border dispute. The lack of clarity as to where the line lies means that hostile encounters are bound to recur, potentially even leading to interstate conflict, with far-reaching consequences for regional and global security. While resolution of the dispute remains elusive, China and India should hedge against risks by creating more buffer zones between their armies and strengthening crisis management mechanisms. The two sides should also resume regular political dialogue to modulate the developing rivalry in their relationship.



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- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2023)
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- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *India Versus China: Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



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