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China's Emerging Disaster Diplomacy: What It Means for Southeast Asia

by Lina Gong

SYNOPSIS

The Chinese government formed two new bodies in 2018 that have been expected to improve China's response to natural hazards and humanitarian emergencies in other countries. What are the implications for Southeast Asia, where the risk and threat of different types of disaster persist?

COMMENTARY

THE CHINESE government has carried out extensive institutional restructuring since March 2018, which includes the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management and China International Development Cooperation Agency. The two institutions are expected to improve China's ability to respond to natural hazards and humanitarian emergencies in other countries.

Disaster relief and humanitarian assistance has become more relevant to China's diplomacy as the country seeks a greater role in global governance and its grand developmental initiative, the Belt and Road, passes through areas vulnerable to different types of disaster. Southeast Asia constitutes an important arena for China's

disaster diplomacy as the threat of natural and man-made disasters persists in the region.

China's Disaster Diplomacy

While the definition of disaster diplomacy remains debated, the concept is based on the assumptions that disasters can induce cooperation and that humanitarian actions have potential to improve international relations. In this context, disaster is used in a broad sense and refers to a situation where natural or man-made causes induce extensive humanitarian needs, such as natural hazards, refugee crises, famines and epidemics.

The Chinese government has increasingly recognised the value of disaster diplomacy for achieving its foreign policy goals like improving international image and maintaining a benign external environment.

Examples of this growing awareness include provision of over US\$1 billion of aid and relief funding to the food crisis in East Africa in 2011; comprehensive response to the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa in 2014, the creation of South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund in 2015; and a significant increase in funding support for the UN Refugee Agency since 2017.

Southeast Asia as an Arena

Southeast Asia provides a good platform for China's attempt to improve external relations through humanitarian aid and disaster relief. Several countries in the region are prone to extreme weather events. In the past 15 years, Southeast Asian countries were affected by record-scale disasters, such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Cyclone Nargis in 2008 in Myanmar, and Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 in the Philippines.

Although Southeast Asian countries and the region as a whole have notably improved its capacity in disaster management, the need for international assistance still exist. The uncertainty and complexity of disasters can overwhelm a state's response system.

Laos that is not a traditional victim of disasters was taken by surprise by the dam collapse in its southern part. The Marawi crisis in 2017 in the southern Philippines lasted for five months, much longer than originally expected. Indonesia was hit by multiple earthquakes and a tsunami stroke in a few months in 2018.

Given the region's vulnerability to disasters, ASEAN has a record of cooperating with extra-regional countries and organisations in disaster response and the broad disaster management.

China's Disaster Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

As Southeast Asia's immediate neighbour, China has engaged with the region on disaster management under the umbrella of cooperation in non-traditional security and increasingly so in recent years. The Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 saw China's largest ever overseas disaster relief operation which covered Indonesia and Thailand. In the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, the Chinese government sent its military hospital ship, Peace Ark, to provide medical assistance, after its initial offer of cash and material aids worth of about \$2 million drew criticism.

During the dam collapse in Laos, a Chinese rescue team arrived in the affected area within three days, among the first international rescuers. The response to the earthquake and tsunami in Palu Indonesia in 2018 saw the participation of Chinese NGOs in addition to its governmental aid and assistance.

At the regional level, disaster relief and humanitarian cooperation has been an agenda for cooperation between China and ASEAN. A memorandum of understanding on disaster management cooperation was signed in 2014, in which China pledged \$50 million of grant assistance to the regional organization to enhance capacity in disaster management. In December 2018, the two sides were deliberating another memorandum to further cooperation.

Despite the existing cooperative activities and arrangements, however, China is yet to be a major or key player in disaster management in Southeast Asia. The aforementioned grant assistance to ASEAN has yet to be disbursed earlier this year

as the specific projects has not been finalised, while the memorandum was effective for three years since October 2014.

China's bilateral and multilateral assistance to Southeast Asia remains small compared to traditional donors like the US, EU and Japan. This is partly due to the fact that disaster management has not been a traditional focal area of China's relations with Southeast Asia.

Improving China's Disaster Diplomacy

As an emerging major actor in the sector, China needs to develop related institution and capacity to be able to use disaster response a tool for diplomacy. The need to set up focal contact point should be assessed, so as to promote communication and coordination with the target countries and regions. Smooth communication facilitates a better understanding about how China's offer of aid and assistance matches the need of the recipients.

Some Chinese volunteers were repatriated, together with other nationals, during the response to the earthquake in Palu in 2018, due to lack of approval from the Indonesian government to operate in the disaster-hit area. Such lesson shows that capacity-building is needed for Chinese humanitarian actors, both state and non-state, for which overseas disaster relief remains new. In particular, soft aspects should be given equal attention, like knowledge of laws and regulations in the host country and sensitivity to local culture and tradition.

Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN have rich experience in cooperating with extra-regional countries and organisations in disaster response, due to the region's vulnerability to disasters. Such experience is of value for China. As China's disaster diplomacy is still in the making, this presents opportunities for Southeast Asia to influence the process through engagement and cooperation, so as to suit the region's own interest in the area of disaster management.

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