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## US-China Rivalry and Implications for Humanitarian Action

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### SYNOPSIS

*Heightening US-China competition is now extended to humanitarian action in the Indo-Pacific. **LINA GONG** argues that subregions in the Indo-Pacific should strengthen cooperation among themselves and that existing multilateral mechanisms should continue confidence building activities and sensitise the big powers to the negative implications of sheer geopolitically driven relief efforts.*

### COMMENTARY

US-China rivalry is the most consequential bilateral interaction in international security and politics today. It involves the two powers competing not only in high-profile areas such as technology, investment, and maritime security, but also in less sensitive ones such as humanitarian affairs. Humanitarian emergencies often catalyse international solidarity, as we have seen in [Turkey](#) following the earthquakes last month. What implications does US-China competition have for humanitarian work? This question is particularly relevant for the Indo-Pacific region, which is disaster-prone and at the forefront of the rivalry.

### Humanitarian Assistance as an Instrument of Competition

China's growing activism in humanitarian affairs is generally [manifested](#) in increased spending, expanded involvement and a [proliferation of actors involved](#). This shift was reflected in China's active responses during recent disasters. In [Turkey](#) last month, a total of [17 private Chinese teams](#) joined the massive international relief effort, complementing China's official aid. Until recently, the vast majority of China's overseas humanitarian engagement was state-led. The move by private Chinese disaster relief

teams to go global is an emerging dynamic in China's international humanitarian action.

Last year, after the volcanic eruption and tsunami in Tonga, the Chinese embassy there rushed to provide locally procured relief goods within the first few days and Beijing followed up with more aid delivered from the mainland by the [Chinese military](#). Although China did not top the list of donors, this case is noteworthy in two ways. First, the deployment of military assets in such a long-distance mission suggests China's improved capability projection and expanded diplomatic reach, although [limits](#) still exist. Second, the South Pacific is not a traditional priority area for China's foreign aid, which is focused on countries in China's neighbouring regions and along the routes of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. China's prompt move in Tonga represents the wider trend of its [strengthening commitment](#) to disaster-related cooperation with the entire Pacific region.

As Beijing increasingly bids for hearts and minds across the world through humanitarian action, other major countries have also strengthened their own humanitarian efforts. This makes humanitarian work more [competitive](#).

As traditional providers of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand dispatched military aircraft to assist in damage assessment within 48 hours of the double disasters in Tonga in early 2022 and followed up with [batches of relief aid](#). Although the United States too [deployed](#) a naval vessel to support Tonga's relief effort, some observers find that the US response was under-recognised in Tonga, compared with that of China. They attribute the under-recognition to [insufficient US engagement](#) with governments in the South Pacific. The United States has since taken [a series of steps](#) to strengthen ties with the region, such as the launch of the Partners in the Blue Pacific, which includes disasters as a prospective area of cooperation, and pledges of funding for disaster-related work. These steps manifest Washington's [growing alarm](#) over China's courtship of Pacific Island countries, exemplified by a security agreement between China and Solomon Islands in March 2022.

Greater emphasis on HADR is also seen in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, encapsulated in the launch of the "Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific" and the adoption of the [Guidelines](#) for this partnership last year. While the United States is a leading HADR provider in the region, these developments suggest the intention to reinforce its leadership and related partnerships, countering China's expanding influence as a major objective.

Distrust and competition make cooperation and coordination between these major HADR providers increasingly difficult. The [Nepal earthquake](#) of 2015 and the [Tonga double disasters](#) illustrated how a lack of coordination hampered relief efforts. While it is not unusual that a state's national interests and geopolitical calculation influence its humanitarian action, letting these factors overshadow the humanitarian objective can result in a [backlash](#).



Though traditionally a catalyst for international solidarity, humanitarian action risks being influenced and overshadowed by current political rivalry. *Image from Unsplash.*

### **Humanitarian Action as a Response to the Spillover of the Rivalry**

Another issue worth pondering is how to prepare for the humanitarian consequences of politically charged events, however improbable they may seem. This includes [conflict](#) in one of the geopolitical [flashpoints](#), such as the Korean peninsula, the East and South China seas, or the Taiwan Strait, all of which are located in East and Southeast Asia. Our experience in the past three years shows that improbable events can happen, and humanitarian response planning should anticipate different scenarios, including the most complicated ones.

Access to affected populations is likely to be a major issue. Although [humanitarian access](#) is a principled matter, there have been plenty cases of impeded access, particularly in complex situations, such as the Myanmar crisis, [Ukraine crisis](#) and [northwest Syria](#) after the earthquake last month. In such circumstances, the humanitarian community needs to negotiate with the parties to the conflict or the government of a country affected by a disaster to get access, which constitutes a form of humanitarian diplomacy.

ASEAN's diplomatic endeavour to persuade the Myanmar government to open its doors to international humanitarian aid after Cyclone Nargis in 2008 is a good example of successful humanitarian diplomacy. The Myanmar government's [trust](#) in its ASEAN fellow member states was critical in enabling ASEAN's bridging role in this case. In contrast, ASEAN has not been able to make progress in implementing the five-point consensus reached with Myanmar following the coup in that country in 2021, which involves a humanitarian component; a lack of trust, among other factors, has contributed to the continuing [deadlock](#). While the two situations differ significantly, they point to the importance of trust in such diplomatic endeavours.

Forced displacement is another potential issue of concern. Countries in the Indo-Pacific region are no stranger to this problem, with a few, such as Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, being either destinations or transit points for refugees. As there is no overarching regional mechanism governing this issue of displacement, it is largely left to individual countries to manage, with support from the international

community. Countries with little prior exposure to this challenge should consider developing a multilateral contingency plan for coping with such a scenario.

## Responding to the Rivalry

While heightening US-China rivalry definitely carries risks and challenges, it still brings certain benefits, such as increased funding and other resources to deal with disasters and other humanitarian emergencies. The launch of the China–Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation in Guangdong, China, last month is an example. The gaps in coordination during the international response to the double disasters in Tonga prompted the discussion on the need for a [Pacific coordinating centre for HADR](#). These initiatives, whether sponsored by the United States, China or other states, should be led by the region itself, rather than serving the purposes of geopolitical competition.

[Inter-regional cooperation](#) between subregions of the Indo-Pacific can be strengthened. As a primary theatre of great power competition for decades, Southeast Asia has accumulated experience in balancing great power politics and self-development. In particular, ASEAN has established the AHA Centre to coordinate international responses to disasters in Southeast Asia. The Changi RHCC based in Singapore provides support to the militaries of affected states in engaging foreign militaries during disasters across the Indo-Pacific. Experience in establishing and developing these centres will be useful for an equivalent entity in the South Pacific.

As the United States and China still recognise the notion of ASEAN centrality, existing ASEAN-centred mechanisms should continue confidence building through activities such as workshops and joint exercises, as trust is essential for effective humanitarian action. The humanitarian crises of the past three years have pointed to new areas of regional HADR cooperation, such as disaster relief in double or triple disasters. Moreover, ASEAN member states and other countries in the Indo-Pacific should use these occasions to sensitise the big powers to the negative implications of sheer geopolitically driven relief efforts.

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