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China's Global Humanitarian Role

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SYNOPSIS

*Why is Beijing often criticised for its humanitarian action, such as its efforts during the ongoing crisis in the Gaza Strip? **LINA GONG** argues that the gaps between China's self-perceived role and external expectations explain the criticisms to some extent.*

COMMENTARY

International attention is now increasingly focused on the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. Since the Israel-Hamas fighting unfolded last October, over 30,000 people have been killed and two million displaced. UN officials have warned of imminent [famine](#) in the Gaza Strip.

China's contribution to the global efforts to address the catastrophe has attracted attention. The Chinese government has so far provided two rounds of relief aid in the form of cash aid, medical supplies, and food to the affected population through the Palestinian Authority and the United Nations and is working to deliver the third batch.

Mr Liao Liqiang, China's ambassador to Egypt, [stated](#) that China had fulfilled its responsibility as a major country since the outbreak of the crisis. This view is [defended](#) by [Chinese scholars](#). Nevertheless, different opinions exist, with some people criticising China for doing little or for [exploiting](#) the crisis for geopolitical gains in its competition with the United States.

It is not new for Beijing to be [accused](#) of not doing enough or the right thing to address a humanitarian crisis, as we have seen before from [Darfur](#) and [Myanmar](#) to [Ukraine](#). Why is China always criticised?

China's Self-Perceived Humanitarian Role

The identity of the Chinese state consists of multiple dimensions, e.g., the world's second largest economy, biggest developing country, member of the Global South, and major country, to list just a few. All these elements shape how China defines its role in the humanitarian space. As a result, we see different trends in China's international humanitarian engagement.

Amid growing economic strength, China's has notably [increased](#) its attention to humanitarian affairs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China carried out its largest humanitarian action ever, although there are controversies and debates surrounding this diplomatic offensive.

For instance, some observers argue that China's COVID-19 diplomacy was driven by strategic and political purposes rather than a humanitarian spirit. In the wake of the Turkey-Syria earthquake in February 2023, a number of Chinese [non-governmental disaster relief teams](#) contributed to the global response, joining the national team. These recent examples are often cited by Chinese officials and scholars as evidence of China being a responsible major country.

Despite these developments, the overall size of China's humanitarian aid remains moderate, compared with that of the leading donors. This relative paucity is in line with China's self-positioning as a developing country, as stated at the beginning of the latest edition of China's white paper on foreign aid, unveiled in [2021](#). Between 2018 and 2022, China's humanitarian spending amounted to [US\\$2.263 billion](#), although there is speculation that the actual size of Chinese aid may be higher than the released figures. In contrast, the [United States and Germany](#), the world's top two humanitarian donors, respectively spent US\$15 billion and US\$ 5.3 billion in 2022 alone.

Emphasising its identity as a developing country and referring to itself as a partner rather than a donor to the recipient countries helps China reinforce solidarity with [the Global South](#) and differentiate itself from Western donors. In principle, Beijing opposes the notion of humanitarian intervention and takes a non-interfering approach to humanitarian crises. This posture carries economic and political importance in China's endeavour to earn the friendship of developing countries as it tries to expand its overseas economic interests and gain support amid competition with the United States and its allies.

External Expectations

The gap between humanitarian needs and aid is ever growing. In 2023, the United Nations appealed for US\$57 billion of humanitarian funding, but only [one-third](#) of this need was met. The idea of China bringing additional funding, resources, and capacity is welcomed by many humanitarian organisations. Both the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#) and the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) expressed the hope that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would include a humanitarian dimension. For recipient countries, China presents an alternative source of support. Competition among major countries is likely to increase

attention to previously neglected humanitarian needs, as in the case of the Pacific islands.

Given China's increasing global influence, it is natural to expect the big power to step out of its comfort zone, such as by sending search and rescue teams after natural hazards, delivering emergency relief items, offering cash aid, and dispatching medical teams to countries in need. The scope of humanitarian action is actually broader, including work such as facilitating humanitarian access, pushing for the respect of [international humanitarian laws](#), and contributing more humanitarian workers.

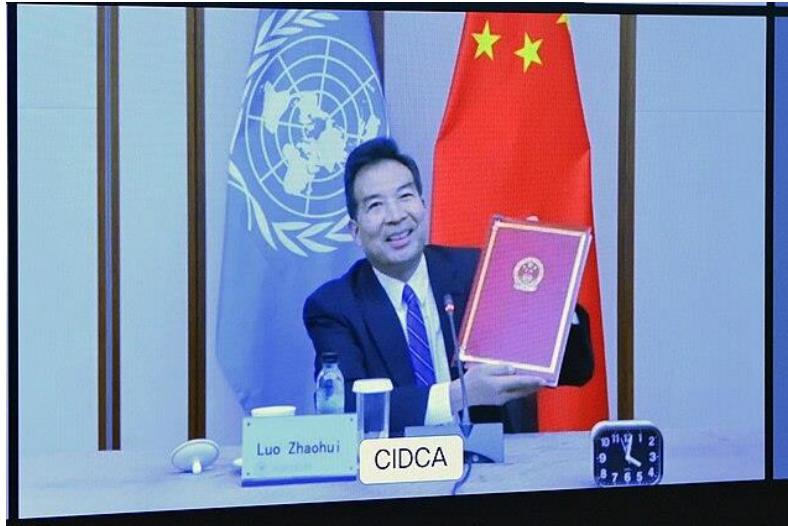
There are other concerns in addition to expectations that China will increase its humanitarian contributions. Although observers can debate whether some of the accusations hurled at it are politically motivated, the [difference](#) between China and established donors in humanitarian [thinking](#) and practices is obviously a cause for concern.

China is not a member of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the club of established donors, which means China's aid programme does not subscribe to DAC standards. China is criticised for lacking transparency and community engagement and for supporting the government concerned, which is often considered a problem in a humanitarian crisis. While it is naive to expect that criticism will disappear if China seeks to join the DAC or fully adopt their standards, efforts to address some of the criticisms can contribute to enhancing external understanding of China's humanitarian work.

Is China Able to Meet Expectations?

Changes are under way in how China's foreign aid is conducted and managed, although some observers may not find the changes adequate. In addition to official aid expanding, Chinese enterprises, non-governmental organisations, and Chinese citizens overseas have become active in overseas humanitarian response.

In 2021, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) released its [Measures for the Administration of Foreign Aid](#) and launched a reporting system to collect aid-related data among Chinese enterprises and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for 2022. This is a step aimed at facilitating better understanding of non-governmental aid activities for the Chinese government. CIDCA recently set up an email account for its spokesperson to enhance communication with international media.



Luo Zhaohui, Chairman of China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), 2021.
Image from Wikimedia Commons.

However, problems remain. Official annual figures of China's humanitarian funding are still unavailable. The white paper of 2021 did not mention how much Beijing had spent during the reporting period (2013–2018). [The publication](#) that CIDCA launched last May provided only the total aid figure between 2018 and 2022 without breakdowns. As such, it is still difficult for the humanitarian community and foreign governments to grasp the trends in China's approach to humanitarian action.

China's financial commitment to global humanitarian funding is unlikely to increase significantly in the near future. First, the performance of the Chinese economy has been disappointing since last year. It is in question whether China will be as generous as it was around 2017, when President Xi Jinping increased humanitarian spending substantially to address refugee issues and the food crisis in the world.

Second, China's approach to foreign aid remains development-oriented, which is a legacy of the country's own development path. In the past, the Chinese government referred to any form of foreign assistance as foreign economic and technological cooperation. Before CIDCA was established in 2018, the Ministry of Commerce managed China's foreign aid in consultation with the ministries of foreign affairs and finance in decision-making. Although China's awareness of its international humanitarian responsibilities has grown, priority is still given to developmental issues.

External expectation of the world's biggest developing country also needs to be realistic as any shift in aid paradigm is likely to be incremental, if at all. It would take more effort for the international community, not just the major humanitarian organisations and other donors but also the developing countries, to convince Beijing that it is in China's interest to step up its humanitarian aid.

Access is a constant challenge in humanitarian action. Negotiating for humanitarian access requires interaction with all parties related to a crisis, including non-state ones. During this process, it is not easy for foreign states to stay neutral and be perceived as such. Long adhering to a policy of non-interference in the affairs of other states, China has rarely involved itself in negotiations with parties other than governments.

Beijing's role in brokering peace talks in Afghanistan from mid-2021 is one example of its influence in fragile countries. Given this example, it is not surprising if some expect China to promote a humanitarian agenda in these talks. Nevertheless, it may take a substantive normative shift for China to take on this responsibility as the Chinese government may attribute its diplomatic success in situations like Afghanistan to its non-interfering approach and may be reluctant to go beyond just creating the conditions for talks.

Conclusion

There are obvious gaps between China's self-perceived role and external expectations, and such gaps explain to some extent the criticisms of its approach to humanitarian aid. Efforts to address the operational and technical aspects of humanitarian work have seen progress, such as in the area of data management. But the more fundamental gaps between China's role and international expectations are difficult to change.

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