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Changing tides

Responding to China's emergence in
Indo-Pacific humanitarian assistance
and disaster relief

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About this paper

Occasional Papers comprise peer-reviewed research and analysis concerning national security issues at the forefront of academic and policy inquiry. They are designed to stimulate public discourse and inform policy solutions. The author thanks the many colleagues consulted for this project but remains solely responsible for the views expressed and any errors contained therein.

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Executive summary

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations are becoming a central theme of Indo-Pacific cooperation. The increasing number of catastrophic events – linked in particular to climate change – calls for collective responses. However, geopolitical trends are simultaneously changing the perception of HADR. As China's relations with the US and its partners are becoming increasingly competitive, so does HADR, which has become a key instrument in the tussle for influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Key points

- The future of HADR operations will involve transforming HADR recipient states from consumers to stakeholders, an endeavour complicated by the gap between their political will for greater appropriation of HADR and their capacities.
- Attempts to improve coordination mechanisms are bound to lead to compromises, where political considerations will increasingly be given space, but operational considerations will still prevail.

Recommendations

- Formalise the creation of the Pacific Response Group (PRG) proposed during the December 2023 South Pacific Defence Minister Meeting (SPDMM).
- Incorporate specific civilian expertise and skills in areas such as sanitary and radiological risks, disasters, floods, intervention capabilities onboard ships, or even rope rescue, into the curriculum of the newly announced Academy for the Pacific, extending participation to all Pacific Island states.
- Preserve existing sub-regional coordination mechanisms – such as the Regional Coordination Centre for operations at Sea (CRCO), based in the Seychelles, or BIMS-TEC. But also turn the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) HADR Working Group into the premier Indian Ocean coordinating mechanism, taking precedence only when the sub-regional mechanism no longer have the capacity to act.
- HADR training should be the prerogative of one organisation of an IONS member state, such as the Australian Civil-Military Centre, which would also provide capacity building for civilian organisations.

Introduction

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations are becoming a central theme of Indo-Pacific cooperation. The increasing number of catastrophic events, linked in particular – although not exclusively – to climate change, calls for collective responses. However, geopolitical trends are simultaneously changing the perception of HADR. The need for cooperative approaches is growing in parallel with the significant politicisation of HADR activities, as they become a key instrument in the tussle for influence in the Indo-Pacific. The driving forces behind this are increasing militarisation due to political motives linked to China's emergence as a major HADR operator in a context of growing power competition, as well as the logistical requirements of operations that are growing in magnitude.

HADR is no longer only a demonstration of goodwill that is likely to generate, at best, a reputational gain for the donor country.

It also demonstrates the assisting nation's commitment to a region, and offers opportunities for coalition-building and engagement with new partners.¹ However, this is a double-edged sword. If HADR operations allow for greater cooperation between armed forces because of their less threatening character, they can also be perceived as intrusive in countries where the assisting state has a history of political domination.

The very possibility of HADR operations depends on the affected state's decision to request or accept assistance from other states. This decision is influenced by their assessment of their own capabilities, the severity of the disaster, as well as the political risks associated with accepting external assistance.

As China's relations with the US and its partners are becoming increasingly competitive, so does HADR. As China's HADR operations are primarily informed by political considerations, Beijing strives to stand out and, as a consequence, has always disregarded cooperation with actors other than the affected nation. This reduces the effectiveness of the international response.² But despite – or because of – its posture, as well as an integration of HADR practices into its larger development policy, China has been able to develop its influence at the expense of the more traditional actors. It has also further accentuated regional polarisation. Like-minded countries such as Australia, New Zealand, France, the US or India in the Indian Ocean are left with few options. They can neither oppose China's HADR operations – which without the ongoing strategic competition would be a welcome addition to the collective effort – nor ignore the political and strategic consequences of China's presence and methods.

This occasional paper argues that engaging regional countries further in the anticipation, planning and conduct of HADR operations is an effective way to counter polarisation dynamics and prevent its subsequent strategic impact. Providing for the needs of the affected countries is necessary, but does not entirely satisfy the demands of regional countries for greater appropriation of HADR, including at the regional level.

1 Frédéric Grare and Melissa Levallant, *What is the future for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Indo-Pacific?*, Observatory of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, December 2023. What is the future for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief cooperation in the Indo-Pacific? :: Observatory of Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific :: Foundation for Strategic Research :: FRS (frstrategie.org), accessed 17 May 2024

2 Matthew Southerland, *The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns*, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 11 July 2019, USCC Staff Report. The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief_7.11.19.pdf, accessed 17 May 2024

Engaging countries in this way would constrain all actors, including revisionist ones such as China, into a similar set of internationally accepted norms of operation. It wouldn't guarantee China's cooperation, but it would shift the burden of justification for any actions that deviate from those norms. China would then risk international disapproval and potential isolation if it chose not to cooperate.

It would moreover recognise the importance of all regional countries in the process (even if it must be recognised that progress has been made towards enabling "locally led response to disasters" since the Istanbul World Humanitarian Summit in 2016). It would also break the perception of a club of Western powers acting for – but not with – regional recipients of HADR.

The challenge will be to do so, while maintaining the effectiveness of existing coordinating mechanisms, taking into account the vast asymmetry between the capacities of the regional states. The way out of this dilemma is a transparent, selective and gradual inclusion process, in which some regional countries with actual HADR capacities would be included, while others could join later as their own capacities met the required level. Efforts in this direction are already taking place in the Pacific, thanks to defence cooperation between Australia, the US and the Pacific countries. There is less progress in the Indian Ocean, where regional disputes considerably inhibit the process.

The changing nature and role of HADR operations

HADR has never been purely a moral duty or a benign tool for assisting vulnerable populations. Geopolitical considerations have always influenced HADR operations. When conducted by armed forces, it can include a potentially coercive dimension, even if it contributes to softening the image of the military and its acceptance by local populations.

Although none of these elements are new, they alone do not explain the renewed interest in HADR. It is based on changing perceptions of threats, and a different understanding of the global security environment.

First, climate change is of growing importance as a security issue. It is seen as a risk multiplier, and a factor in the depletion of natural resources. It has the potential to change the operational environment in which armed forces operate. It has consequently increased the strategic nature of HADR, as well as the attention it receives.

Second, the perception threats that are linked to power rivalries have not disappeared, but are now linked to non-traditional security concerns, in which disasters figure prominently. At a time when the legitimacy of war as a state policy has considerably diminished, it naturally makes the ability to respond to disasters an instrument for asserting influence, leading to a “blending of traditional and non-traditional security threats in new formulations of security agreements”.³

In such a context, as asserted by analyst Bibek Chand, “the relations between the affected state’s government and the populace, as well as that government’s international relations, are crucial, especially in the context of the immediate and long-term responses, for the direction that reconstruction effort will take”.⁴ HADR operations rarely take place in a political and historical vacuum – political history often plays a role in the perception of operations by the populations and governments of the affected countries. Disasters produce opportunities for a change in relationships through non-coercive measures such as rescue missions in the immediate aftermath of disasters.

HADR therefore has the potential to influence the nature of international relations with disaster-affected countries.

Geographical proximity and logistical capacity are also major factors in the effectiveness of HADR operations, although not the only ones. The degree of political penetration by HADR actors significantly impacts their logistics, and therefore the effectiveness of their operations. This is because HADR can only be implemented with the agreement of affected state countries, while the possessions of overseas military bases in the affected state is also a facilitating factor.⁵

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- 3 Vanessa Newby, “ANZUS cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster response in the Asia-Pacific: ships in the night?”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 74:1, 72-88, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693497?needAccess=true>, accessed 21 May 2024
 - 4 Bibek Chand, “Disaster Relief as a Political Tool: Analysing Indian and Chinese Responses after the Nepal Earthquakes”, *Strategic Analysis*, 2017, Vol. 41, No 6, 535-545, Disaster Relief as a Political Tool: Analysing Indian and Chinese Responses after the Nepal Earthquakes (tandfonline.com), accessed 17 May 2024
 - 5 Frédéric Grare, Melissa Levallant, *Op. Cit.*

From this perspective, HADR can be seen as a form of soft power applied to national security. Humanitarian disasters often reveal the vulnerabilities and lack of resources of states in disaster management. By contrast, HADR competence is an indicator of operational readiness for conventional forces, whereas HADR military deployment is a matter of hard power, even if presented as soft power.⁶ Overall, HADR is indeed a political tool.

Ultimately, the impact of HADR operations varies according to the intention of the provider.

The growing need for HADR capacities in a majority of Indo-Pacific coastal or island states, combined with the growing polarisation of international and regional relations, undoubtedly makes HADR an instrument of strategic competition.

However, this polarisation also gives the affected states considerable agency, adding a twist to the dynamic.

The impact of China as a provider of HADR in the Indo-Pacific has to be assessed through this set of considerations. For the affected countries, China's emergence as a HADR actor matters because of its HADR practices and the volume of its operations. But it is also part of a larger process in which regional states see the possibility of acquiring margins of diplomatic manoeuvre, which they are unlikely to renounce. For other assisting countries, its importance lies primarily in its political significance and strategic consequences. This should ultimately lead them to redefine their cooperation with affected countries, including in the conduct of HADR operations.

6 Deon K. Canyon, Benjamin K. Ryan, "Military and Private Sector HADR – Now a Sophisticated Tool for Strategic Competition", *Security Nexus*, Vol. 22 – 2021, 1 September 2021
Military and Private Sector HADR – Now a Sophisticated Tool for Strategic Competition - Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (dkiapcss.edu), accessed 17 May 2024

The evolution of China's HADR

While the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been actively involved in domestic HADR efforts since its inception in 1949, China is a relative newcomer to international HADR operations. It was only in 2000 that the Politburo adopted a 'going out' policy in which HADR was one of the activities through which China could build a new, responsible, international image. Since then, China has become one of the largest non-OECD humanitarian aid providers.⁷ The past two decades have witnessed not only a steady increase in China's humanitarian spending, but also its growing presence in international humanitarian missions.

China conducted one of its first HADR operations in 2002 when it delivered relief to Afghanistan after an earthquake.⁸ Between 2002 and 2019, China intervened in 16 disasters in 13 countries, mostly on its East and South Asian peripheries.⁹

It is no coincidence that they were implemented in countries where China is in direct rivalry with the US (Pakistan) and India (Bangladesh, Maldives and Nepal), and where it is relatively easy for China to mobilise its HADR capacities. It has since expanded its operations to the South Pacific, signalling greater capacities and intent, with Tonga and Vanuatu among the most recent Chinese HADR operations.

In Southeast Asia, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was China's largest ever overseas HADR operation, where it responded in Indonesia and Thailand. China also intervened in Laos, when a dam collapsed, as well as in Palu (Indonesia) in 2018. HADR has since then become part of the cooperation agenda between China and ASEAN, with a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on disaster management cooperation signed in 2014. Beijing pledged US\$50 million of grant assistance to the organisation to enhance HADR management capacities.¹⁰

In January 2022, it dispatched two vessels to Tonga when the nation was hit by a tsunami generated by the massive eruption of an underwater volcano.¹¹ In May 2022, the two countries signed cooperation deals on disaster relief, agriculture, fisheries and health.¹² HADR was also part of the "framework agreement on bilateral security cooperation" signed in April 2022 between China and Solomon Islands.¹³ In March 2023, when Vanuatu was hit twice by tropical cyclones, China provided emergency humanitarian cash assistance before announcing that it would help the country's reconstruction effort.¹⁴

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- 7 Peng Lin, "China's evolving humanitarian diplomacy: Evidence from China's disaster-related aid to Nepal", *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2021, Vol. 6(3), 221-237, China's evolving humanitarian diplomacy: Evidence from China's disaster-related aid to Nepal (sagepub.com), accessed 17 May 2024
 - 8 Matthew Southerland, *Op. Cit.*
 - 9 Zimmer Chris, "Perspectives on Chinese and American HADR in the Indo-Pacific Region", The University of Texas at Austin, 8 March 2020, *Perspectives on Chinese and American HADR in the Indo-Pacific Region* (utexas.edu)
 - 10 According to Singaporean analyst Lina Gong, in December 2018, China and ASEAN did start discussions over a second memorandum to further cooperation but the promised US\$50m had not been disbursed three years after the October 2014 MoU had been effective. Lina Gong, "China's Emerging Disaster Diplomacy: What It Means for Southeast Asia", RSIS Commentary, No 023, 6 February 2020
 - 11 Jr. Ng, "China dispatches naval vessels on Tonga relief mission while Australian LHD flounders", *Asia Military Review*, February 3, 2022, China dispatches naval vessels on Tonga relief mission, while Australian LHD flounders - Asian Military Review, accessed 17 May 2024
 - 12 Zhang Hui and Shang Jie, "China, Tonga to deepen ties in disaster relief, agri, health", *Global Times*, May 31, 2022, China, Tonga to deepen ties in disaster relief, agri, health - Global Times, accessed 17 May 2024
 - 13 *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on April 19, 2022*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202204/t20220419_10669768.html, accessed 17 May 2024
 - 14 Huaxia, "China to help Vanuatu's relief, reconstruction efforts continuously: FM spokesperson", *Xinhua*, March 2023, China to help Vanuatu's relief, reconstruction efforts continuously: FM spokesperson-Xinhua (news.cn) , accessed 17 May 2024

The political significance of China's HADR

The significance of China's international HADR operations has evolved over the past two decades, growing in importance, but also moving in parallel to the regime's objectives. As early as 2004, Hu Jintao, then general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, argued that "China's role in international HADR effort was part of a broader historical mission in which China would increase its global role".¹⁵ HADR operations project a positive and friendly image of the assisting state and allow it to demonstrate competence, and most Chinese discussions on the country's contribution to HADR operations were aimed at enhancing China's prestige on a global stage.¹⁶ In September of that same year, China established an inter-ministerial response mechanism for international emergency humanitarian relief and aid,¹⁷ which was activated during the devastating December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

But the objectives set for HADR in the Chinese system have changed under Xi Jinping, becoming more than just a contribution to the country's effort to build its reputation as a responsible global power. China understands that HADR is "one of the fastest avenues to establish influence and access via the exercise of power in regions of interest".¹⁸ HADR operations may be part of an "agenda to improve global standing and prestige of China",¹⁹ they also intend to advance Beijing's policy interests and regional hegemony.

The unprecedented attention given to humanitarian assistance in the foreign aid white paper of 2021 illustrates the growing importance of

HADR in China's foreign policy. While there was only a short paragraph dedicated to HADR in the 2011 white paper,²⁰ and a limited part of a larger chapter entitled "helping improve people's livelihood" in the 2014 paper,²¹ it was given an entire chapter in the 2021 white paper under the heading "Responding to Global Humanitarian Challenges Together".²²

It also reflects an evolution of the scope and geography of China's humanitarian assistance. China defines HADR as a component of its development cooperation. It includes emergency humanitarian aid in response to natural disasters or public health crises.²³ Indeed, China's HADR operations tend to reflect its diplomatic priorities. Taking these considerations into account, it is worth noting that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) passes through areas vulnerable to different types of disaster. Africa and Asia still receive the bulk of China's assistance, accounting for 80 per cent of the country's total aid during the period 2013-18 while Pacific islands accounted for 3.71 per cent during the same period. This represented an increase of 21.7 per cent of the yearly aid received by the Pacific region in 2010-12.²⁴

The PLA's role in China's HADR: enhancing operational capabilities

Although China did not use its military forces for aid delivery until 2010, the PLA has considerably expanded its involvement in HADR operations over the past two decades and now assumes a significant role, which provides it with an opportunity to build diplomatic ties.²⁵ It is the central hub of China's HADR effort.

15 Zimmer Chris, *Op. Cit.*

16 Matthew Southerland, *The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Contributions and Concerns*, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 11 July 2019, USCC Staff Report. *The Chinese Military's Role in Overseas Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief_7.11.19.pdf*, accessed 17 May 2024

17 Denghua Zhang, *China's Third White Paper on Foreign Aid - A Comparative Analysis*, Brief 2021/3, Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, *China's Third White Paper on Foreign Aid - A Comparative Analysis (anu.edu.au)*, accessed 17 May 2024

18 Taylor Tielke, "The Evolving Nature of China's Humanitarian Assistance", *Liaison*, Volume X, Winter 2018, p. 42

19 Taylor Tielke, *Op. Cit.* p. 39.

20 *China's Foreign Aid (2011)*, Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China, Beijing, April 2011, *China's Foreign Aid (2011) (www.gov.cn)*, accessed 17 May 2024

21 *China's Foreign Aid (2014)*, Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China, Beijing July 2014, *China's Foreign Aid (2014) (www.gov.cn)*, accessed 17 May 2024

22 *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, Beijing, January 2021, Full text: *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era | english.scio.gov.cn*, accessed 17 May 2024

23 Robin Watters and Alexander Triplett, *China and the Future of HA/DR Operations in Great Power Competition*, Watson Institute International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/research/PRC%20HADR%20in%20GPC%2018%20Oct.pdf>, accessed 17 May 2024

24 Denghua Zhang, *Op. Cit.*

25 Taylor Tielke, *Op. Cit.* p. 39.

Yet, the PLA has objectives of its own in the conduct of HADR exercises and operations – improving operational capabilities is one of them. Indeed, HADR is part of what the PLA classifies as military operations other than war (MOOTW), which are tasks similar to those of war. Performing them constitutes a test of equipment and troop capabilities, allowing the identification of gaps in doctrine, the learning of lessons, and the promotion of general combat effectiveness and mitigation of operational experience deficit.²⁶ MOOTW in general, and HADR in particular, have helped the PLA fill key operational gaps in the development of strategic sea and airlift capabilities and non-combatant evacuation operations.²⁷

China has known for a long time that “MOOTW are an important means to enhance the military’s operational capabilities”.²⁸

*HADR operations pose a real and important test of a nation’s force projection capabilities as disasters are unpredictable and require an immediate response to be effective.*²⁹

They involve command and control, small unit leadership, engineering, helicopter operations, and logistics capabilities necessary to project and support forces abroad.³⁰ In peacetime, they help measure the evolution of a country’s force projection capability.³¹

China’s International Search and Rescue Teams (CISAR), created in 2001, illustrates the point. Its members are comprised exclusively of military personnel from the PLA and the People’s Armed Police (PAP). Deployments of CISAR teams for HADR operations therefore constitute military force projection.

The PLA has also sent personnel from non-CISAR units to participate in HADR operations in instances when CISAR was already fully engaged.³²

Overall, China’s HADR operations have long been implemented by a large number of different agencies – 33 according to some analysts³³ – operating within the framework of an increasingly specialised institutional architecture, under the broad umbrella of foreign aid, where the number of NGOs has considerably grown. However, the Chinese government carried out an extensive restructuring in March 2018, creating a Ministry of Emergency Management (MEM), which regroups resources and powers that were previously spread over 13 ministerial departments, as well as the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA).³⁴

Although growing, the size of Chinese HADR remains relatively small compared to other countries, which has sometimes created a serious credibility gap for China. This makes it all the more politically important for the PLA to be seen as the first responder.³⁵ This has had two major consequences. On one side, it has limited China’s assistance to the relatively basic level of HADR, but has at the same time helped single out China among other donors. China not only wants to be the first responder, it also refuses to cooperate with other HADR providers on the field, other than the recipient state.



- 26 MOOTW also includes activities such as counterterrorism, antipiracy, stability maintenance, security monitoring and border patrols, international peacekeeping. John S. Oudenaren, “Military Operations Other Than War: Antidote to the PLA’s ‘Peace disease?’” *China Brief*, Vol. 22, Issue 4, 25 January 2022, Military Operations Other Than War: Antidote to the PLA’s “Peace Disease”? - Jamestown, accessed 17 May 2024
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Shou Xiaosong (Ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy*, Beijing, Military Science Press, 2013, p. 161. See also, *China’s Military Strategy*, The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, Beijing, May 2015, China’s Military Strategy (full text) (www.gov.cn), accessed 17 May 2024
- 29 Jeffrey Engstrom, “Taking Disaster Seriously: East Asian Military Involvement in International Disaster Relief Operations and the implications for Force Projection”, *Asian Security*, Vol. 9 No 1, 2013, pp. 38-61.
- 30 Matthew Southerland, *Op. Cit.*
- 31 Jeffrey Engstrom, *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Emilio Moreno, “The People’s Liberation Army Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Operations in Oceania”, in *China’s Multi Pronged Approach To Gain Influence in Oceania*, Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance, August 2022, LinkClick.aspx?cfe-dmha.org, accessed 17 May 2024
- 34 Emilio Moreno, *Op. Cit.*
- 35 Taylor Tielke, *Op. Cit.* p. 42.

China's HADR and international cooperation

China's quest for specific visibility also raises the issue of its cooperation with other international bodies in charge of humanitarian action. It has been careful to maintain some distance between itself and the structures of the international humanitarian system as its conception and implementation of HADR, differ from the practices promoted by the various agencies which constitute this system. As observed by Japanese academic Miwa Hirono, "China is not a member of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) or of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)'s Donor Support Group, for instance, nor is it part of the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative".³⁶

Ignorance or lack of interoperability cannot be blamed for this situation since China does participate in bilateral exercises. Since 2011, it has conducted exercises with Australia, Cambodia, Germany, India, Malaysia and New Zealand.³⁷ Interestingly, China also conducted an annual Disaster Management Exchange (DME) with the US between 2005 and 2020.³⁸

But these exchanges primarily help Beijing achieve broader diplomatic and national security objectives by collecting intelligence and learning from other countries. According to US policy analyst Matthew Southerland, "the PLA has sometimes been able to practice skills that are directly applicable to combat operations during HADR exercises" with the US and other countries, despite the fact that US law prohibits exchanges that would enhance PLA combat capabilities.³⁹ China has thus participated in the multilateral naval exercise Komodo with the US and 47 other countries.⁴⁰ It also participates in combined military exercises with Malaysia and Thailand that include HADR, as well as combat exercises.⁴¹ Yet, these exchanges and exercises never translate into multilateral cooperation in actual HADR operations. China refuses to cooperate with other armed forces other than the ones of the affected states.

36 Miwa Hirono, *Exploring the links between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action: Multiple interests, processes and actors*, Overseas Development Institute, January 2018, p. 12, 12015.pdf (cdn.ngo), accessed 17 May 2024

37 Emilio Moreno, *Op. Cit.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 Matthew Southerland, *Op. Cit.*

40 Sebastian Strangio, "Indonesia kicks off naval exercises with involvement of China, US", *The Diplomat*, 6 June 2023. Indonesia Kicks Off Naval Exercises With Involvement of China, US - The Diplomat, accessed 17 May 2024

41 Matthew Southerland, *Op. Cit.*

Recent Chinese HADR operations in the Indo-Pacific

China's intentions, as expressed in its HADR practices, are illustrated by some of its recent operations. They demonstrate the primacy of China's strategic objectives over humanitarian ones. Beijing's constant insistence on operating alone in an operational framework defined bilaterally with the recipient country allows it to place HADR operations into a political and diplomatic framework that is entirely defined by itself for its own benefit. This does not mean that the affected state will not get the benefit of the HADR operation, nor does it mean that Beijing is always successful in the pursuit of its political goals. However, the existence of a pattern underlines the similarity of the political objectives in all the countries where Beijing decides to intervene. Ultimately, the disproportionate focus on a limited number of countries with which China wants to improve bilateral relations leads to "uncoordinated and wasted efforts within a particular area of humanitarian crisis" and to an increased mistrust between China and other international HADR actors.⁴²

Philippines (2013)

In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, killing 1,700 people and displacing 615,000 others. Beijing initially contributed some US\$200,000 in assistance.⁴³ The sum was far less than what China had offered in assistance to previous disasters and well below the amounts provided by the other responding countries.

It was perceived as hugely inadequate and China became the object of strong international criticism.⁴⁴ Beijing reacted by sending a non-governmental search and rescue team as well as the PLA's *Peace Ark* hospital ship.

But even then, political considerations prevailed. Beijing did not formally offer to deploy the ship for another 10 days due to tensions with Manila over competing claims in the South China Sea. The ship arrived more than two weeks after the typhoon struck the Philippines, whereas all other supporting nations were operational on site less than a week after the disaster.

Nepal (2015)

The Gorkha earthquake in April 2015 marked a milestone for China's HADR diplomacy in Nepal. China's response to the 8.1 magnitude earthquake was one of its most sizable deployments abroad on a humanitarian aid mission. The PLA dispatched more than 500 personnel, as well as eight fixed-wing transport aircraft and three helicopters to conduct HADR operations.⁴⁵

Geostrategic considerations were not absent from China's management of its intervention, even if the relief effort was not accompanied by political rhetoric from Beijing's establishment. The Taiwanese government had offered to send search and rescue teams, but they were refused. It was generally acknowledged that Chinese pressure was behind Nepal's decision.⁴⁶

42 Miwa Hirano, Exploring the links between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action: Multiple interests, processes and actors, *HPG Working Paper*, January 2018, 12015.pdf (cdn.ngo), accessed 17 May 2024

43 Lina Gong, *HADR as a Diplomatic Tool in Southeast Asia-China Relations amid Security Dynamics*, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 3 December 2021, *HADR as a Diplomatic Tool in Southeast Asia-China Relations amid Changing Security Dynamics* - Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, accessed 17 May 2024

44 Ibid.

45 Matthew Southerland, *Op. Cit.*

46 Bibek Chand, "Disaster Relief as a Political Tool: Analysing Indian and Chinese Responses after the Nepal Earthquakes", *Strategic Analysis*, 41:6, 535-545

Chinese scholars do not shy away from the fact that China's growing interest in humanitarian assistance to Nepal "has mainly been driven by the deepened strategic relationship between the two countries against the backdrop of Nepal's pursuit for autonomy from India and China's expanding economic and geopolitical interests in Nepal fuelled by the implementation of the BRI".⁴⁷ This led to China's significant involvement in Nepal's post-earthquake reconstruction with a strong emphasis on connectivity infrastructure, as well as all equipment considered essential for Nepal's economic recovery.⁴⁸

Strategic and political objectives translated into the way China managed its cooperation on the ground. The PLA treated its own sector as sovereign territory rather than an area where it would coordinate the international response.⁴⁹ Despite being part of the Multinational Military Coordination Center (a coordination mechanism established by Nepal to deal with foreign military forces deployed on the HADR mission), the PLA preferred bilateral cooperation with the Nepalese army. A coordination mechanism was established by Nepal to deal with foreign military forces deployed on the HADR mission of the day. It also refused to allow other foreign military responders access to its area of operation due to concerns about its image.⁵⁰ When the US proposed that some of its helicopters and vertical take-off aircraft operate in the Chinese-controlled area that lacked vertical lift capability, the PLA refused, preferring, as stated by Matthew Southerland, "to save face rather than save lives".⁵¹

Tonga (2022)

On 15 January 2022, the underwater Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha'apai volcano began erupting, triggering a tsunami that caused damage locally and regionally, killing three people and causing major destruction to coastal communities.⁵²

China was among the main countries aiding Tonga, sending a Y-20 heavy transport plane

loaded with emergency supplies, followed on 31 January by two vessels, including a Type 071 amphibious transport dock ship and a supply ship. In the process, the PLA demonstrated its improving long-range air and sea transportation capabilities. The planes travelled over 9,000 km to provide some 33 tons of assistance to Tonga, while two ships had to cover more than 8,000 km at sea to deliver 1,400 tons of tsunami relief supplies.⁵³

Yet again, China acted alone. Rather than cooperating with other countries' armed forces, it delivered aid to Tonga individually and was absent from the HADR international coordination cell established at Australia Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC).⁵⁴ As observed by some academics "this resulted in competition for pier-side support, access to tarmacs and flight scheduling" and a lack of quality control on the donated equipment.⁵⁵

It should be observed that China's assistance received much more praise from the Tongan government than that of the US, Australia, France, Japan, New Zealand or other international actors, who provided more assistance, but received less recognition, reflecting the excellence of the diplomatic relationship between China and Tonga but also, and perhaps more importantly, a capacity to communicate more effectively about its HADR operations.⁵⁶ In the narrative that it did promote in both the local press and the MFA website, China appears as the first responder, based on food items delivered by the Chinese embassy. But China's most significance assistance arrived after everybody else.⁵⁷

There is still a disconnect between the reality of China's material help and its insistence on being seen as the first responder to a crisis. For China, HADR is just one means of influence among others, but one that it uses remarkably effectively. In May 2022, China and Tonga signed a MoU to cooperate in the area of disaster response and risk management.

47 Peng Lin, *Op. Cit.*

48 *Ibid.*

49 Anuttama Banerji, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: New Frontier for China-India Contestation?, *The Diplomat*, 19 December 2023, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: New Frontier for China-India Contestation? – The Diplomat, accessed 17 May 2024

50 Matthew Southerland, *Op. Cit.*

51 *Ibid.*

52 International Tsunami Information Center, UNESCO, 2024. 15 January 2022, Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha'apai Volcanic Eruption and Tsunami - International Tsunami Information Center (ioc-unesco.org), accessed 17 May 2024

53 John S. Oudenaren, *Op. Cit.*

54 Brian Waidelich, *Tonga Aid*, CNA, Wednesday, 16 February 2022, Tonga Aid | CNA, accessed 17 May 2024

55 Joanne Wallis, Anna Powles, Henrietta McNeill, "When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for the Pacific", *The Strategist*, 8 March 2023, When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for, the Pacific | The Strategist (aspistrategist.org.au), accessed 17 May 2024

56 Lillian Dang, How China messages its Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: A case study of Tonga, in Michelle U. Ibanez, *China's Multi-Pronged Approach to Gain Influence in Oceania*, Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, August 2022, LinkClick.aspx?cfe-dmha.org), accessed 17 May 2024

57 *Ibid.*

Strategic implications for the United States and like-minded partners

China's emergence as an international HADR actor has changed the perception of traditional providers, such as Australia, France, New Zealand and the US, who have worked together as partners, as well as India. Their HADR operations are still not primarily about countering China, but they too understand HADR as a vector of influence, even if humanitarian considerations continue to play a predominant role. They see their own influence eroded by Beijing's growing presence in the region and cannot ignore its political consequences. They increasingly tend to see HADR through strategic lenses and behave accordingly, comforted moreover by the fact that China, not them, refuses to cooperate in HADR operations, despite the various exchanges and joint exercises in which Beijing has been invited to participate.

Although the Indian government does not mention China in its communications about HADR, countering Beijing's regional penetration in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is undoubtedly an objective of New Delhi's HADR policies. The two countries have engaged in a race over the issue and India is now quickly responding to humanitarian disasters in the region. Whether it was tsunami-affected South Asian countries such as the Maldives and Sri Lanka in 2006, earthquake-affected Pakistan in 2005 and Nepal in 2015, or Bangladesh in 2017 with the Rohingya refugee crisis, all have benefitted from India's HADR operations.⁵⁸

Since 2015, India has held an annual joint HADR exercise involving the participation of the Army, Air Force and Navy as well as several disaster response organisations, NGOs, academic institutions and international organisations, with the stated objective of rendering "assistance to [India's] friends and partners in the region".⁵⁹ India openly uses HADR as a means to manage Chinese influence in the IOR. Like China, India also insists on being perceived as the first responder in the case of disaster.⁶⁰ Indian commentators have been more open over their perception of the threat posed by China's HADR, seeing India's assistance to its neighbours driven primarily by New Delhi's concerns about Beijing's influence in its neighbourhood, where they fear that China may potentially use HADR to subvert Indian influence in South Asia and the IOR,⁶¹ and in this context, describe HADR as a key element of India's foreign policy.

Similarly, the US response to China's growing involvement in responding to humanitarian crises is evolving, from positive to increasingly concerned. US observers have for some time believed that HADR was an area of potential cooperation between the US and China.⁶²

58 Manoj Kumar Mishra, 'India and Its South Asian Neighbours: Perception of Threats and Realities – Analysis', *Eurasiareview*, 16 July 2019, pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1906761, accessed 17 May 2024

59 Annual Joint HADR Exercise (AJHE) 2023 – (CHAKRAVAT 2023), Indian Navy, pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1965929, accessed 17 May 2024

60 *India has emerged as first respondent in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) at Global level: CDS Gen. Anil Chauhan*, Ministry of Defence, 14 March 2023, pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1906761, accessed 17 May 2024

61 Anuttama Banerji, *Op. Cit.*

62 Jen Pearce, "HADR and US-China Military Cooperation", *The Diplomat*, 28 July 2014, HADR and US-China Military Cooperation – The Diplomat, accessed 17 May 2024. See also Austin McKinney, "It's Time for the US and Chinese Militaries to Cooperate on HADR", *Asia Dialogues*, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 6 December 2018, It's Time for the U.S. and Chinese Militaries to Cooperate on HADR | Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, accessed 17 May 2024

However, this initial optimism – linked to the belief that China’s participation in HADR operations would lead to its socialisation into internationally accepted norms of behaviour – is gradually ceding to questions over Beijing’s willingness to act cooperatively during multi-national operations, detracting from the international community’s ability to render assistance to the largest number of people in the process. The US does indeed increasingly question China’s ulterior motives.

Australia shows similar trends. It does consider that HADR serves its “strategic interests in ensuring security, stability and cohesion in the region and in being the region’s principal security partner”.⁶³ Australia is also aware that existing natural disaster hazards are compounded by the effect of climate change, increasing regional demand for its help. Indeed, its capabilities are likely to be drawn on by its regional partners,⁶⁴ while at the same time opening the way for additional actors. Australia, whose regional policy is primarily about preventing the presence and influence of a potentially hostile China, while maintaining good economic relations with Beijing, cannot be indifferent to China’s uncooperative participation in HADR operations in the South Pacific, nor to the inclusion of HADR-related clauses in some of China’s regional security agreements. Ultimately, Australia could run the risk of becoming irrelevant in its own backyard.⁶⁵ In order to manage the contradictions inherent in these constraints, the Australian government does not communicate on China’s role as an emerging HADR actor in the South Pacific.

New Zealand, which entertains an even more cautious relationship with China, follows a similar pathway and is mostly mute about China’s involvement in HADR operations in the South Pacific.

Since the 1990s, New Zealand governments have prioritised peace operations and HADR, which have shaped its military spending.⁶⁶ New Zealand is indeed well-suited to perform HADR operations in the South Pacific. Officially, these are strictly for humanitarian purposes, yet are carried out within a framework in which interoperability with the US and Australia (with whom its strategic interests converge and overlap, including vis-à-vis China) is the priority. In this context “joint HADR naval exercises provide a useful function”.⁶⁷

France has yet to include HADR as part of its Indo-Pacific narrative, although as a member of the trilateral France, Australia and New Zealand (FRANZ) agreement, it is deeply involved in HADR operations in the Pacific. This seems to indicate that, if the highest echelons of the French authorities have understood the value of HADR as a useful instrument of managing its relationships with the island states of the South Pacific, it has not yet fully integrated the increasingly strategic character of the activity.

In this context though, it should be observed that it is not “clear how much influence HADR provides [the donors] beyond the ability to decide [their] immediate response to the disaster”.⁶⁸ This remark of Australian academic Joanne Wallis, with regard to Australia, is true for all the traditional donors, even if HADR does indeed contribute to security, stability and cohesion. There is little evidence that the diplomatic benefits generated by HADR operations systematically outweigh their cost, as too often asserted by the specialised literature.⁶⁹

63 Joanne Wallis, *Pacific power? Australia’s Strategy in the Pacific Islands*, Melbourne University Press, 2017 p. 142.

64 Teagan Westendorf, *Snapshot in a turbulent time: Australian HADR capabilities, challenges and opportunities*, ASPI Special Report, October 2021, *Snapshot in a turbulent time: Australian HADR capabilities, challenges and opportunities* (amazonaws.com), accessed 17 May 2024

65 Vanessa Newby, *Op. Cit.*

66 Vanessa Newby, *Op. Cit.*

67 *Ibid.*

68 Joanne Wallis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 142.

69 See for example Shishir Upadhyaya (2022), “Naval humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations in the Indo-Pacific region: Need for fresh thinking”, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol 18, No 3, pp. 282-294,

The implementation of the FRANZ agreement in Tonga (cyclone Waka in December 2001, tsunami in September 2009 and January 2022, as well as cyclone Ian in 2014), Niue (cyclone Heta in late 2003, early 2004), Vanuatu (cyclone Ivy in February 2004), Fiji (floods in April 2004 and cyclone Evan in December 2012), the Cook Islands (cyclones Meena, Nancy, Olaf and Percy in February 2005), Ambrym Island (acid rain in March 2006), Solomon Islands (tsunami in April 2007), Papua New Guinea (floods in November 2007), Tuvalu (drought in October 2011) or Samoa (cyclone Evan in December 2012) among other examples, has only temporarily boosted the image of the FRANZ signatories.

It is interesting to note in this context that although Chinese HADR is growing in volume and quality, it does not yet match the operations of traditional donors. However, this in no way negatively impacts China's influence in any of the aforementioned countries.⁷⁰ Nor does the fact that China's refusal to coordinate with other external donors in HADR operations hamper their efficiency.⁷¹

It does question, however, the role of the recipient states, who have fully understood the opportunities that arise from the current polarisation, and cannot be simply seen as the passive objects of external benevolence. There is little doubt that HADR operations are greeted with relief and gratitude by the concerned populations and governments. They can also help in establishing new relations or lessen existing tensions between two states. However, they do not alone define entirely the relationships between two countries, no matter how generous the assistance.

China's amount of assistance is typically a secondary consideration since its presence as a responder often gives recipient states leverage with other nations.

For this reason, they are likely to cultivate the relationship, irrespective of what they actually get from China in terms of HADR commitments during operations. This makes smaller states' aspirations to greater appropriation of HADR operations central to any evolution of existing mechanisms, but inevitably creates a tension between political imperatives and actual capacities.

70 Frédéric Grare and Melissa Levallant, *Op. Cit.*

71 Australian academics and experts Joanne Wallis, Anna Powles and Henrietta McNeil explain how, for example, China's absence from the HADR international coordination cell established by Australia's Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) during Tonga's twin disasters in January 2022 led to competition for pier-side support, access to tarmac and flight scheduling and a lack of quality control of the donated equipment. Joanne Wallis, Anna Powles, Henrietta McNeil, "When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for, the Pacific", *The Strategist*, 8 March 2023. When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for, the Pacific | The Strategist (aspistrategist.org.au), accessed 17 May 2024

The future of HADR operations in the Indo-Pacific

Future HADR coordinating mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific will have to navigate the various constraints outlined in earlier sections of this paper. China cannot be wished away from HADR operations, even if Beijing's disrespect for the sovereignty of the recipient country in some cases (like Nepal in 2015), and agreed operations protocol, as well as its refusal to cooperate with international operations, would sometimes justify it. The political consequences of China's presence cannot be ignored either. It would moreover be a mistake to believe that China's influence will disappear if and when the needs of the recipient states are satisfied. The increase in the number of disasters would make such an approach futile.

More likely, the future of HADR operations will be in transforming HADR recipient states from consumers to stakeholders. This is likely to be an incremental and difficult process as tensions between capacities and political aspirations can only be expected to be reduced over a long period of time and only if and when serious capacity building efforts are undertaken.

In the meantime, attempts to improve coordination mechanisms are bound to require compromises, in which political considerations will be increasingly given space, but where operational considerations will still prevail.

Beyond FRANZ: improving inclusivity of HADR operations in the South Pacific

Signed in 1992, by Australia, France and New Zealand, the FRANZ arrangement is meant to coordinate disaster reconnaissance and relief assistance in the Pacific. It is a civilian-led mechanism with military support, which operates under the joint responsibility of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the three countries. Under the agreement, Australia, France and New Zealand intervene at the request of partner countries, namely the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.⁷²

In the event of a disaster, the three countries share information (particularly in the meteorological field to warn of the formation of cyclones) and assessments, divide responsibilities, and pool civil and military resources, both human and material, through coordination between ministries and embassies. As FRANZ partners recognise the sovereignty as well as the leading role of affected countries in responding to disasters, they coordinate with local authorities, as well as the Pacific Humanitarian Team.⁷³ Interoperability and understanding between the three FRANZ signatories and their Pacific partners are maintained through annual meetings and joint military exercises such as Southern Cross.

72 *The FRANZ Arrangement*, Canberra, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, October 2014, [Franz-Arrangement-Brochure.pdf \(mfat.govt.nz\)](#), accessed 17 May 2024

73 The Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) is a network of humanitarian organisations working together to assist Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) to prepare for and respond to disasters. The PHT's Area of Responsibility (AOR) covers the following PICTs: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. *The Pacific Humanitarian Team - Annual Report 2022*, The Pacific Humanitarian Team - Annual Report 2022 | OCHA (unocha.org), accessed 17 May 2024

The FRANZ arrangement remains fundamental to HADR in the South Pacific since it brings together the three regional countries with actual capacity. However, the HADR needs have increased as a consequence of increasing disasters while FRANZ's relative importance has declined over the past decade as new actors such as China have entered the scene.

In this context, the Pacific Island states tend to see the three signatories as too prescriptive and are aspiring to have greater agency over their own situation. The need “to partner with, not for, the Pacific” is also acknowledged by academics.⁷⁴ However, while the idea of making the coordinating mechanism more inclusive seems to be gaining ground, most – if not all – South Pacific Island states still lack the capacity required. None of them possesses the assets that would allow them to project force. Fiji for example, has patrol boats, but they are poorly adapted to heavy seas, which reduces their usefulness in the event of disasters. If necessary, Fijian capacities are transported by Australian ships.

Beyond FRANZ: the proposal for a Pacific Response Group

In this context, Australia's Minister of Defence, Richard Marles, proposed the creation of a Pacific Response Group (PRG) during the December 2023 meeting of the South Pacific Defence Minister's Meeting (SPDMM) in Noumea. Although not dedicated exclusively to HADR, the PRG would play a significant role every time military disaster relief was required. The PRG would be akin to a Pacific battalion, a standing body, regrouping military personnel of the SPDMM member states.⁷⁵

The PRG would not call into question the central role of FRANZ.^[1] Diplomatic coordination between Australia, France and New Zealand, as well as the predominantly civilian character of HADR, would remain unchanged. The PRG would operate under existing civilian response frameworks.

The use of the PRG would only occur at the level of the operational response, with command entrusted to officers belonging to the SPDMM countries. HADR would take place within a framework in which the operation protocol would have been previously negotiated and validated in advance, unlike the current situation where each operation has to be negotiated on a case by case basis with the concerned governments, which considerably slows down operations.

As such, the PRG would be a formalisation of the existing processes that it intends to simplify. It would be a step in the direction of greater participation for island states in HADR operations. While the island states of the SPDMM have always been participants to some extent, the PRG – which would still have to be negotiated and tested in operation – would deepen their operational integration and give them much greater responsibilities.

The problem of greater appropriation of HADR would remain for islands states that are not part of the SPDMM, exacerbated by an even greater capacity deficit. Capacity building could then constitute a second field in which integration could be promoted. Training for HADR exists in the region, but specific expertise in fields such as sanitary and radiological risks, disasters, floods, intervention capabilities on board ships (in case of water leaks, fires, etc) or even rope rescue, are still lacking. This set of skills could become part of the curriculum of the Academy for the Pacific announced by the French President during his visit to New Caledonia. The mandate of the academy would be to train trainers, which would have a multiplying impact across the region, but would also generate the trainers for the academy itself as regional expertise developed. This second level of integration would admittedly be relatively marginal and dependent on the level of expertise developed during the training, but would nevertheless offer some perspective to the less richly endowed states.

74 Joanne Wallis, Anna Powles, Henrietta McNeill, “When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for the Pacific”, *The Strategist*, 8 March 2023, When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for, the Pacific | The Strategist (aspistrategist.org.au), accessed 17 May 2024

75 The SPDMM includes Australia, Chile, Fiji, France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga.

[1] Although the question may be raised if observer countries, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, were to send personnel and assets to the PRG. It is difficult to imagine in particular that the US would mobilise capacities without having a say in decision-making. The enlargement of the consultative mechanism could then slow down the decision-making process and potentially defeat the purpose.

Enhancing HADR in the Indian Ocean

The situation in the Indian Ocean Region shares similarities, but also significant differences, with that of the South Pacific. As in the latter, China is increasingly present and active, using HADR as a way of promoting its influence (Pakistan) if not active pressure (Nepal).

As underlined by a 2024 report of the ANU National Security College, “the scale and diversity of the [Indian Ocean] militates against a single disaster preparedness, prevention, and response and recovery architecture”.⁷⁶ Yet the case can also be made that since the relationships of the major actors with their immediate neighbours is often burdened by historical and political baggage, there is a need to enlarge coordination mechanisms beyond their sub-regional dimension in order to bypass the political difficulties in the event of disaster.

However, no coordination mechanism can be built outside existing realities. Like in the South Pacific, the capacities of the littoral and small island states of the Indian Ocean are limited at best, particularly but not exclusively on the African shores, with a few notable exceptions. Unlike the South Pacific however, the weakness of the capacities may be comparable to the existing situation in the South Pacific, but the Indian Ocean is much less politically integrated than the latter – the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) does not compare with the Pacific Island Forum (PIF).

As a result, coordination mechanisms are underdeveloped and gaps remain, despite initiatives such as IORA, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). All regional or sub-regional organisations of the Indian Ocean have tried to develop coordination mechanisms of their own. The creation of an Indian Ocean HADR architecture is unlikely, however, to result simply from the addition of existing mechanisms that provide for an uneven coverage of the different subregions.

Any attempt to develop a coordination mechanism in the Indian Ocean must consider the factors that have so far inhibited its develop-

ment, even if no coordination mechanism can take them all into account at the same time. It should, however, tend towards the largest possible participation without creating unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles that would increase the response time.

In this context, one could imagine a dual-track mechanism, based on existing structures but specifying the role of each and articulating them whenever possible. Recognising in advance however, that it is very much a process, a way to build on existing realities to move gradually to a united coordination mechanism.

The IONS as a permanent secretariat and coordination mechanism for HADR in the Indian Ocean

The IONS is perhaps the platform with the most interesting potential to develop a regional coordination mechanism. Politically, it includes most of the navy chiefs of the littoral and island state countries of the Indian Ocean. It already conducts exercises to promote interoperability between navies,⁷⁷ and organises regular conferences and seminars for the exchange of best practices. The IONS has also published guidelines for HADR⁷⁸, aligned with international norms, which specify that committing national capabilities can only be made on a voluntary basis by member states and with respect to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national legislation of the affected state.

It also details the main mechanism of action and is unquestionably the most operational platform in the Indian Ocean. Even if HADR is not the sole responsibility of navies, cooperation at sea remains inhibited by a series of factors – the lack of interoperability that enables navies of different sizes and natures to cooperate effectively is the predominant problem. The IONS would perform a central role, acting as the default coordination mechanism and working overtime on the unification of the Indian Ocean operating procedures. This role would be fulfilled through the current IONS HADR Working Group,⁷⁹ which would be enlarged to Singapore, South Africa, Kenya and the UAE. All are (relatively) politically

76 Alan Ryan, *Regional Disaster Response in the Indian Ocean Region*, National Security College, 19 March 2024, *Regional Disaster Response in the Indian Ocean Region* | National Security College (anu.edu.au), accessed 17 May 2024

77 Shishir Upadhyaya, “Naval humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations in the Indo-Pacific region: need for fresh thinking”, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2198887>, accessed 17 May 2024

78 *IONS Guidelines for HADR*, Version 3.1, December 2017, *Guidelines IONS on HADR Version.pdf*, accessed 17 May 2024

79 The IONS HADR working group is currently composed of Australia, Bangladesh, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Maldives, Pakistan, Timor Leste. *IONS Working Groups*, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, IONS Working Groups | Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, accessed 17 May 2024

compatible and represent various parts of the Indian Ocean, which would make it more likely that countries would accept assistance from powers external to the considered sub-region. The larger participation would allow for a degree of political inclusivity, without affecting the decision-making process, nor the operations themselves.

Its functions would be threefold. It would act as a HADR secretariat for the Indian Ocean, playing for IONS members the role initially dedicated to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM), which never materialised. IONS member states would be requested to take legislative and administrative measures to implement – on a voluntary basis and in connection to the political authorities of the concerned countries⁸⁰ – IONS guidelines provisions. These include measures for requesting and receiving assistance; conducting needs assessments; mobilising equipment, personnel, materials and other facilities; making regional standby arrangements, including emergency stockpiles; and ensuring quality control of relief items, in line with the *Oslo Guidelines on the use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief*.⁸¹ It would also maintain a roster of assets that could be potentially mobilised in real time and work on all the legalities indispensable to diminish response times and facilitate the operations.⁸² Finally, it would be in charge of military capacity-building. Capacities and capabilities should indeed be maintained and improved through interoperability and created in countries where they do not exist or prove insufficient. It would, moreover, be in charge of the planning of exercises between navies.

The IONS would also act as a coordinating mechanism each time the needs of a specific country or sub-region affected by a disaster surpassed its response capacity.⁸³ The political diversity of the states represented in the IONS HADR Working Group would facili-

tate access to the national authorities of the affected countries and, whenever necessary, help overcome the bilateral difficulties linked to historical or political baggage that have sometimes inhibited or slowed operations in the past. Such a task is already assumed by the IONS Secretariat whenever the need arises.

The training part of the IONS (conferences and seminars for the exchange of best practices) would be left to the HADR training centre of one member state, such as the Australian Civil-Military Centre, which would also provide capacity-building for civilian organisations.

HADR efficiency is conditioned by the speed of the response, and is therefore a function of distance and capacities. As such, existing sub-regional coordination mechanisms should be preserved when they have proven their relevance. The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) for example, has two valuable assets, the Regional Center for the Fusion of Maritime Information (CRFIM) based in Madagascar, which covers an area stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Regional Coordination Centre for operations at Sea (CRCO), based in the Seychelles, which is essential for maritime operation of HADR although not exclusively dedicated to it.

Specific countries such as India would also play a major role, directly or under the auspices of IONS, as its location and capacities (including the Gurgaon-based IFC-IOR) makes it an operational partner of choice for the entire region. However, the operational consequences of the politically difficult relationships it sometimes entertains with its neighbours could be lessened if it did operate under an IONS label.

80 Interoperability can only be developed through joint interactions (exercises, courses). Rivalries and political enmity between the states of the region have so far prevented or limited it.

81 *Guidelines on the use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief – Oslo Guidelines*, November 2006, 8706B7B69BD77E00C1257233004F0570-OCHA-Nov2006.pdf

82 IONS would operate on the model of the Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM), initiated by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) signed in 2011, ratified in 2016 but never really created, *Disaster Response in Asia and the Pacific*, OCHA, OCHA - United Nations (unocha.org), accessed 17 May 2024

83 The number of countries capable of providing assets for the projection of relief material is limited and unevenly located around the Indian Ocean. India of course, Australia, France but also Singapore, Indonesia, South Africa, increasingly the United Arab Emirates and perhaps Kenya, could be in this perspective the main providers of assistance. Although not all of them have the range of large, medium and small ships or helicopters that allow for the transportation of personnel and material not just to the affected countries, but to the most remote locations where these personnel and material are expected, they will have to be taken into account in deciding the architecture of one or several mechanisms in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

None of the evolutions, actual or potential, discussed in this paper are likely to change the reality of China's emergence as an HADR actor. From a humanitarian perspective, China's presence could be seen as a welcome addition to the resources that can be mobilised at a time of growing needs, providing it puts the affected population and not its geostrategic interests at the centre of its response.

China's refusal to cooperate in international HADR operations is, however, turning an initially cooperative field of action into a competitive one.

It is this competition that gives HADR recipient states considerable bargaining power.

As China is – and will continue to be – a part of the strategic landscape, it would be futile and counter-productive to try eliminating it from the field. Although difficult and potentially lengthy, it may be possible to change the political significance of its HADR operations and their propaganda value.

China's contribution to HADR is still much less consequential than what is being provided by other assisting states, be it in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean. What matters, however, for most affected countries is its presence, which offers recipient states the possibility of alternative partnerships.

Partnering with them, instead of for them, would not eliminate the capacity deficit that many – if not most – recipient states are facing. It would, however, change the relationship with them in a way that would not make China irrelevant, but would reduce the political benefits that it derives from its HADR operations and therefore the incentives for Beijing to continue. China would only be one among others and not necessarily the most important.



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