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# THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

## VEHICLE FOR CHINA'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

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**Policy Report**

# **THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE VEHICLE FOR CHINA'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION?**

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## **Executive Summary**

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) encompasses overseas activities of diverse Chinese actors mainly focused on infrastructure projects and investments. China has increased its contributions to humanitarian projects in countries along the BRI routes, which are under-explored. This policy report examines China's humanitarian action, assesses how effective China is in translating its growing resources to greater humanitarian contributions, and discusses the relevance of humanitarian activities to the BRI and what it means for Southeast Asia. The report finds that China prioritises the BRI partner countries in its humanitarian efforts although it has yet to develop a strategy to integrate its humanitarian activities with the initiative. As Beijing transforms its aid programme, Southeast Asia therefore has more room to manoeuvre to engage China's increasing humanitarian activities.

# Introduction

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was announced in 2013 and is President Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy effort. The Chinese government conceived the BRI as a strategy to enhance connectivity and connectedness with other countries, focusing on infrastructure development, trade, and investment. The initiative has triggered extensive international discussions on its economic and geopolitical implications.<sup>1</sup>

As China's economic activities overseas are expanding, its humanitarian aid is also growing. President Xi pledged US\$2 billion in 2015 to set up the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF) and contributed another US\$1 billion in 2017, part of which is used for humanitarian purposes.<sup>2</sup> Under the SSCAF, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for instance has received funding for 11 emergency humanitarian projects since 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the place of humanitarian aid in the BRI remains ambiguous and contested. The official Chinese narrative presents the BRI as a platform for China to engage in international development.<sup>4</sup> Some BRI proponents in China insist that the initiative is designed for development rather than aid.<sup>5</sup> However, there have been humanitarian activities under the "people-to-people" dimension of the BRI, such as the donation of medical supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This policy report seeks to enhance the understanding of China's humanitarian action in relation to the BRI. It evaluates China's approach to humanitarian aid, analyses the major issues facing related Chinese actors, and explores possible partnerships between China and participating Southeast Asian countries. This report finds that although the BRI per se does not have a

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bhattacharya, Amar, David Dollar, Rush Doshi, Ryan Hass, Homi Kharas, Mireya Solis, and Jonathan Stromseth. China's Belt and Road: The new geopolitics of global infrastructure development. Brookings, April 18, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-belt-and-road-the-new-geopolitics-of-global-infrastructure-development/>. Flint, Colin, and Cuiping Zhu. "The Geopolitics of Connectivity, Cooperation, and Hegemonic Competition: The Belt and Road Initiative." *Geoforum* 99 (February 1, 2019): 95–101.

<sup>2</sup> Wu Jiao and Li Jing, "Xi Pledges \$2 Billion to Help Developing Countries," *China Daily*, September 27 2015, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-09/27/content\\_21991152.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-09/27/content_21991152.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Online interview with a UN staff member, February 2021b.

<sup>4</sup> China tends to use "international cooperation" to represent its aid activities. See, China's State Council Information Office, "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era," 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/10/c\\_139655400.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/10/c_139655400.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Online interview with a researcher of a Chinese think tank, February 2021.

humanitarian angle,<sup>6</sup> the countries that engage in the BRI are primary beneficiaries of China's humanitarian aid. A lack of clarity in how humanitarian aid and the BRI are related has hampered China's aim to increase the impact of its aid and drive support for the development of the BRI.

This study was informed by scholars, staff of international organisations, and humanitarian practitioners in the Asia-Pacific and Europe, whose views were gathered via 27 online interviews between December 2020 and March 2021.

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<sup>6</sup> Online interview with a UN staff, January 2021a.

## Humanitarian Assistance and the BRI

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China's humanitarian assistance has three main features. First, China prioritises humanitarian needs which are less politically sensitive. China's humanitarian aid primarily flows to non-conflict settings such as natural hazards, food crises, and infectious diseases. The World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization are the top two recipients of China's humanitarian contributions to the UN.<sup>7</sup> WFP set up a humanitarian hub in Guangzhou in April 2020 to support the UN's global COVID-19 response plan and other humanitarian efforts.<sup>8</sup>

Second, China distances itself from perceived direct engagement in politics when providing humanitarian aid to countries in need.<sup>9</sup> China refers to itself as a partner for international development rather than an aid donor, and places its humanitarian projects under South-South cooperation which is a framework for development cooperation between developing countries.<sup>10</sup> Third, China adopts a state-centric and bilateral approach, which differs from the emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnerships in the humanitarian sector.<sup>11</sup> The state-centric approach has limited China's engagement with the broad humanitarian community, despite its cooperation with UN agencies and major international humanitarian organisations.

In tandem with the roll-out of the BRI, China has notably increased its humanitarian spending. In 2017 when the first Belt and Road Forum was convened, Beijing contributed US\$128 million to the UN.<sup>12</sup> National interest is undeniably a driving factor behind this move, as in the cases of other donors as well.<sup>13</sup> Along the two BRI routes, there are countries vulnerable to natural hazards and internal conflicts. As China's economic stakes in BRI-participating countries grow, it is therefore in its own interest to facilitate and contribute to effective humanitarian response.

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<sup>7</sup> OCHA FTS, <https://fts.unocha.org/data-search>, last accessed on 15 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> WFP, "WFP Launches a Global Humanitarian Hub in China to Support Efforts against COVID -19," 30 April 2020, <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-launches-global-humanitarian-hub-china-support-efforts-against-covid-19>.

<sup>9</sup> Miwa Hirono, "Three Legacies of Humanitarianism in China," *Disasters* 37, no. 2 (2013): 203.

<sup>10</sup> Online interview with a UN staff member, January 2021a.

<sup>11</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group et al., "Positive Disruption? China's Humanitarian Aid," *Humanitarian Horizons Practice Paper Series* (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2019):11.

<sup>12</sup> OCHA FTS, <https://fts.unocha.org/data-search>, last accessed on 15 February 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Online interview with a UN staff, January 2021c.

Recently, China's humanitarian assistance has featured a wider scope of involvement and seen a proliferation of actors. China's donations to conflict-induced humanitarian emergencies have increased substantively since 2013. There were eight Chinese donations to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) between 2001 and 2020, with four donations made in 2017 alone.<sup>14</sup> As of March 2021, the UNHCR have eight projects funded by the SSCAF.<sup>15</sup> Given China's previous reluctance to engage in refugee issues, these developments can be seen as a shift in attitude.

The Nepal earthquake in 2015 saw many Chinese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) join emergency relief operations in a foreign country for the first time.<sup>16</sup> The activities of Chinese technology companies were noteworthy. The Alibaba Group entered into a strategic partnership with the WFP in 2018 and provided technological support for the agency's global hunger monitoring system launched in 2019.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Tencent has been a technology partner of UNDP in China since 2016. In 2020, when the UN was planning global dialogues to mark its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Tencent and the UN entered into a global partnership which allowed the Chinese company to provide technical support for the UN's online events. However, the plan was frozen, reportedly due to data protection concerns of some people in the UN.<sup>18</sup> This episode points to the challenges Chinese companies face when they seek to deepen engagement in humanitarian affairs.

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<sup>14</sup> OCHA FTS, <https://fts.unocha.org/data-search>, last accessed on 15 February 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Online interview with a UN staff member, January 2021a.

<sup>16</sup> Liuting Chen, "Chinese Foundations and NGOs Cross Border to Aid Nepal," *The Asia Foundation* (blog), 10 June 2015, <https://asiafoundation.org/2015/06/10/chinese-foundations-and-ngos-cross-border-to-aid-nepal/>.

<sup>17</sup> WFP, "WFP and Alibaba Enter Strategic Partnership to Support UN Sustainable Development Goal of a World with Zero Hunger," 5 November 2018, <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-and-alibaba-enter-strategic-partnership-support-un-sustainable-development-goal>.; WFP, "WFP and Alibaba unveil next generation of machine learning technology in the fight against hunger," 25 September 2019, <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-and-alibaba-unveil-next-generation-machine-learning-technology-fight-against-hunger>.

<sup>18</sup> Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, "U.N. Backs Down on Partnership With Chinese Firm for 75th Anniversary," *Foreign Policy* (blog), 5 March 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/15/united-nations-backs-down-china-coronavirus-censorship-tencent-seventy-five-anniversary-international-organization/>.

## Expanding China's Humanitarian Assistance and the Challenges Faced

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China is an important but not yet a major partner of the global humanitarian community, despite recent increases in funding. Even in 2017 when China made its largest annual donation to date, its share in global humanitarian spending that year was just about one per cent.<sup>19</sup> In addition, China needs to address challenges such as capacity constraints, fragmentation in its aid system, and differences between its approach and the humanitarian community, to increase the impact of its humanitarian assistance. Some people also note there are transparency issues that deserve attention.<sup>20</sup>

First, China's aid action lacks a long-term strategy<sup>21</sup> and is primarily driven by the will and interest of top leaders, particularly President Xi.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Chinese government agencies prefer quick impact projects.<sup>23</sup> Chinese NGOs tend to engage in activities which get more exposure because it helps with fundraising and recognition.<sup>24</sup> Another result is a lack of engagement in global policy discussions, which has limited the impact of China's humanitarian assistance.<sup>25</sup>

Second, differences between China and the humanitarian community in how humanitarian action is defined and practised have led to difficulties in cooperation. The Chinese government emphasises the emergent nature of humanitarian aid and classifies many projects that address humanitarian needs induced by protracted crises within its development activities. This approach has challenged its engagement with international humanitarian organisations in conflict settings.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> OCHA FTS, <https://fts.unocha.org/data-search>, last accessed on 15 February 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Zirong Yu, "An Overview of China's Foreign Aid in the Past 70 Years," in *China and International Development 2020*, ed. Institute of International Development Cooperation, Institute of West Asian and African Studies, and Diinsider (Beijing, 2020), 17; Online interview with a NGO practitioner based in Cambodia, January 2021; Online interview with a UN staff member, February 2021a.

<sup>21</sup> Online interview with a scholar based in Japan, January 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Online interview with a UN staff member, January 2021c.

<sup>23</sup> Online interview with a UN staff member, January 2021a.

<sup>24</sup> Online interview with a UN staff member, January 2021b.

<sup>25</sup> Online interview with a scholar based in Japan, January 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Online interview with a former staff of an international humanitarian organisation, March 2021.

The controversy over the UN-Tencent partnership reflects the absence of common standards and the obstacles Chinese actors have to overcome. While Chinese actors need to be sensitised to humanitarian needs and concerns in the field as well as international practices, it is also important that efforts are made to enhance mutual understanding between the global humanitarian community and China.

Third, China's aid system is in transition. Beijing established the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) in 2018 to consolidate its foreign aid programmes. The institutional reform gives greater weight to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the aid system, which was previously dominated by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM). Foreign Minister Wang Yi oversees the work of CIDCA in his capacity as State Councillor. Aid projects are now proposed to CIDCA by China's diplomatic missions. Previously, projects were reported to MOFCOM by the Commercial and Economic Office within a diplomatic mission. Nevertheless, implementation of aid projects largely remains with the agencies affiliated with MOFCOM. Moreover, CIDCA is positioned at the vice-ministerial level and its coordination with the line ministries still faces challenges.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, CIDCA in its current form is unable to fundamentally change the scattered nature of China's aid.

Fourth, geopolitics and controversies over the BRI have led to a reluctance of Chinese actors to participate in humanitarian action with others. Although debt trap diplomacy is contested,<sup>28</sup> the misunderstanding of or resistance to the BRI projects can still have a spill-over effect on China's humanitarian assistance efforts.<sup>29</sup> Responses of Chinese companies to natural hazards in host countries is usually ad hoc and in the form of donations and repairing of infrastructure.<sup>30</sup>

The military plays a crucial role in immediate disaster response, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) now has strong capabilities in disaster relief. However, the concern over China's military power has made the deployment of the PLA a sensitive issue in some neighbouring countries, even for humanitarian purposes. The heightening US-China rivalry further increases reluctance to accept China's military assistance.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Online interview with a UN staff, January 2021c.

<sup>28</sup> Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy,'" Research Paper (London: Chatham House, August 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy>.

<sup>29</sup> Online interview with a China scholar based in Australia, January 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Online interview with a staff member of the general office of Shanghai municipal government, February 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Online interview with an Australian scholar based in China, February 2021.

Fifth, constraints in funding, capacity, and network limit the action of many Chinese humanitarian organisations overseas. While the BRI opens the space for diverse Chinese actors to go overseas, there lacks a comprehensive policy framework to guide and support humanitarian activities.<sup>32</sup> China's current aid system offers few opportunities for civil society groups to apply for official funding to implement humanitarian projects abroad.<sup>33</sup>

The Nepal earthquake exposed weaknesses in Chinese relief groups such as poor coordination, disconnection from the global humanitarian community, and limited policy support from official channels. Few Chinese humanitarian actors have the capability to engage in humanitarian projects in the long term.<sup>34</sup> The absence of Chinese actors in the field leads to a lack of understanding of and meaningful engagement with the trends in the humanitarian sector, such as localisation. To make a substantial impact in the humanitarian sector, China's aid programme needs people who are familiar with international frameworks and practices of humanitarian action and are well-connected in China.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Online interview with a Chinese NGO practitioner, January 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Online interview with a Chinese NGO practitioner, February 2021a.

<sup>34</sup> Online interview with a Chinese NGO practitioner, February 2021a.

<sup>35</sup> Online interview with a UN staff member, January 2021b.

## What It Means for Southeast Asia

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Southeast Asia hosts key infrastructure projects in the BRI. Meanwhile, the region is vulnerable to natural hazards and is exposed to multiple humanitarian challenges. Studies find that some BRI infrastructure projects in Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines face relatively high earthquake risks, some in Cambodia and southern Myanmar are subject to floods, and those in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Laos are impacted by tropical storms.<sup>36</sup>

China and Southeast Asia have a long history of bilateral and multilateral cooperation/engagement in disaster management and emergency response since the late 1990s, in the form of emergency relief, technological/technical support, and joint military exercises. The expansion of the BRI and the transformation of China's aid programme create opportunities for the partnerships to develop further and also broaden the space for Southeast Asian governments and humanitarian actors to engage China's increasing humanitarian activities.

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<sup>36</sup> "Southeast Asia: The Pearl of the Maritime Silk Road," Special Report of Disaster and Risk in the Belt and Road Region (JOINT RESEARCH CENTER FOR DISASTER AND RISK MANAGEMENT, 2019), 33-5, <http://irg.bnu.edu.cn/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SR-BR-2019-SEA-EN.pdf>.

## **Recommendations**

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Greater interactions between Southeast Asia and China can help both sides deal with their respective challenges in humanitarian action. Southeast Asian governments and humanitarian actors should be more active in engaging China's growing humanitarian spending by sensitising their Chinese counterparts to the region's humanitarian needs and preferred models of cooperation. China should use its engagement in Southeast Asia as a pathway to connect with the wider humanitarian community, to improve transparency and engagement, and to build trust. This policy report recommends three ways to enhance China-Southeast Asia relations in humanitarian affairs.

### **1. Southeast Asia and China should further existing cooperation in humanitarian action**

Singapore and China for example can strengthen the humanitarian component in their partnership and jointly contribute to capacity building in Southeast Asia. The two countries upgraded the Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation in 2019, which includes cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They can regularise this component in their joint exercises, such as the Exercise Cooperation. In addition, they can provide joint training in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief for a third military. Similarly, the Singapore Civil Defence Force and its Chinese counterpart can build on their good working relations to jointly help others in the region strengthen capacity in disaster response.

### **2. China should make its humanitarian spending more accessible to humanitarian actors beyond the UN system, including those in Southeast Asia**

Currently, China relies primarily on bilateral channels and UN agencies for implementing humanitarian projects overseas. To improve the international impact of its humanitarian action, it is necessary for China to adapt its approach to the changing humanitarian landscape in Southeast Asia and globally. China should consider opening its funding for projects undertaken by actors other than UN agencies and major international humanitarian organisations.

Civil society plays an important role in dealing with humanitarian challenges in Southeast Asia. China should provide financial support for pilot projects between Chinese humanitarian groups and their Southeast Asian counterparts in capacity building as well as humanitarian activities. Such interactions can help China diversify the modalities of its humanitarian work and develop a better sense of the humanitarian needs and practices in the region.

### **3. Southeast Asian governments should take a more active approach to influencing China's humanitarian activities in the region**

Humanitarian action in Southeast Asia is predominantly led by national governments, supported by ASEAN, with active contributions of extra-regional partners, civil society, and the private sector. Hence, the region is a bridge between China and international humanitarian partners.

Southeast Asian countries should initiate deeper engagement with China in humanitarian affairs. They can propose joint humanitarian activities and projects that involve China and other humanitarian partners. Southeast Asian governments can encourage Chinese enterprises to go beyond providing relief aid on an ad hoc basis to become regular partners of the local disaster management network. In this way, Chinese companies can be more sensitised to local humanitarian needs, while their strengths in areas such as infrastructure and information and communication technology can be more effectively mobilised for humanitarian purposes when needed.

## About the Author

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## About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre)

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The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.



**NTS Centre** conducts research and produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building the capacity to address non-traditional security (NTS) issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre addresses knowledge gaps, facilitates discussions and analyses, engages policymakers, and contributes to building institutional capacity in areas which include: Climate Security, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, Food Security, and Nuclear Safety and Security. The NTS Centre brings together myriad NTS stakeholders in regular workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as provides a networking platform for NTS research institutions in the Asia Pacific through the NTS-Asia Consortium.

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