

# China's Potential Role in Humanitarian Assistance

Andrea Binder and Björn Conrad



# **Raising the Bar**

Enhancing Transatlantic Governance of Disaster Relief and Preparedness

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## Table of Contents

<b>About this paper</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>About the authors</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>II. Outlining the international humanitarian system</b>	<b>6</b>
Donor governments – one of various groups that constitute the humanitarian system	6
<b>III. China’s changing approach to humanitarian assistance</b>	<b>9</b>
Earlier approaches	9
Observing change: Indian Ocean tsunami and Wenchuan earthquake	10
Explaining change: potential motives for China’s shifting approach	11
All stars aligned: China’s potential role in humanitarian assistance	13
<b>IV. Traditional donors’ changing approach to China</b>	<b>14</b>
From dissociation to rapprochement	14
Explaining change: potential motives for traditional donors’ shifting approach	14
<b>V. Barriers to change</b>	<b>16</b>
China’s barriers to increased engagement	16
Traditional donors’ barriers to increased engagement	17
<b>VI. Policy recommendations</b>	<b>18</b>
The portfolio approach	19
Reversing the trust-cooperation-cycle	20
Maximizing the benefits	21
<b>Literature</b>	<b>23</b>

## About this paper

This paper is part of the 18-month research project *Raising the Bar: Enhancing transatlantic governance of disaster relief and preparedness* which is undertaken jointly by the Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin and the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C. The project is financed by the European Commission and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

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## I. Introduction

The integration of China into multilateral mechanisms for global problem-solving is one of the great challenges the international community faces in the 21st century. Efforts to integrate China into international humanitarian assistance mechanisms are not only likely to be successful, but also promise particularly high benefits for all parties involved.

This policy paper sets out to examine the potential benefits of comprehensive cooperation with China within the international humanitarian system, as well as the barriers to this cooperation. The paper argues that eliminating existing barriers is neither impossible nor prohibitively costly and therefore an endeavor worthwhile pursuing. It will, however, require significant joint efforts by traditional donors and China. The policy paper concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at facilitating China's participation in multilateral humanitarianism.

China's integration into international humanitarian assistance mechanisms has the potential to greatly benefit humanitarian assistance. Its inclusion would strengthen the global legitimacy of international humanitarianism among developing countries, particularly in the regional context of East Asia. Furthermore, China's participation would increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance by adding a wealth of knowledge and experience, cultural expertise and political relationships that would complement existing mechanisms and remedy some of the weaker points of the humanitarian system.

The Chinese leadership also has important reasons for contemplating a deeper integration into the international humanitarian system. Engagement in multilateral humanitarian efforts promises to be especially effective at boosting China's regional and international reputation, aiding Beijing's desire to be acknowledged as a responsible stakeholder of the international system. Moreover, international cooperation opens multiple avenues for obtaining advanced technology and know-how that would improve China's domestic capabilities to cope with its frequent emergencies.

This paper focuses on China because it is rapidly gaining importance as a potential new donor and significant player within the field of humanitarian assistance. This should not, however, be understood as discounting the importance of other emerging donors like the Gulf States, Russia, India or South Africa. In fact, while some of the dynamics described in this paper are very specific to the Chinese context, others apply to other emerging donors as well. As such, this paper is as much a starting point for the discussion and examination of China's role in humanitarianism as it is for the more general debate on the significance of emerging donors for humanitarian assistance.

## II. Outlining the international humanitarian system

*There must be a more forthright engagement with change, building on the bedrock of time-tested principles and creating a humanitarian enterprise that is inclusive, participatory, transparent and accountable and, above all, that is "of the world" rather than "of the north".*

(Antonio Donini, et.al)<sup>1</sup>

The starting point for the analysis of China as a potential humanitarian donor is the assumption that if the country's role in humanitarianism is to grow, it has to integrate and be integrated into the international humanitarian system. What exactly does this mean? What are the main actors, traits and rules of this system? What is the state of the system and how does it perform? Is it worthwhile for China to integrate itself into the system? If so, what effects could such integration have on the system?

While the exact dimension, scope and reach of action and overall performance of the humanitarian system are largely unknown to date,<sup>2</sup> this section provides a cursory outline of the most important actors, institutions and rules that constitute international humanitarianism. This establishes the basis for examining China's position vis-à-vis the system.

### **Donor governments – one of various groups that constitute the humanitarian system**

The humanitarian system can roughly be divided into two parts: providers and recipients of humanitarian assistance. There are five different groups of providers of assistance: the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, humanitarian NGOs, humanitarian United Nations agencies, donor governments and so-called new actors, such as the military and business.

The role of donor governments has significantly changed over the past ten to fifteen years: Humanitarian assistance has found its way into the foreign policy portfolios of (Western) governments. This is reflected by growing foreign aid budgets allocated for humanitarian purposes and a proliferation of donor policies on humanitarian issues.

The entrance of humanitarianism into governments' foreign policy portfolios triggered three important developments:

First, most governments and international bodies now approach humanitarian assistance in the larger context of international security and development. The US Army Civil Affairs Unit's "winning hearts and minds" strategy in Afghanistan, the European Commission's Instrument for Stability<sup>3</sup> and integrated United Nations missions are prominent, though very different, examples of this development.

Second, governments are beginning to institutionalize their humanitarian response at the national and international level. Nationally, many foreign affairs ministries have created specialized departments focusing on humanitarian assistance. The founding of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 1998<sup>4</sup> is a primary example of global institutionalization. OCHA pooled funding mechanisms,<sup>5</sup> international norm and standard development fora such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (GHD), the development of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid,<sup>6</sup> as well as close cooperation in donor support groups and on boards of humanitarian agencies, reflect the increasing degree of global institutionalization. The enhanced role of donors also becomes apparent at the field level, where practitioners are beginning to observe a move from pure information exchange between donors to content discussions.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Donini et.al. (2009): *Humanitarian Agenda 2015*, p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Humanitarian Outcomes (2009): *Inception Paper for the State of the System Review*, p.1

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/worldwide/stability-instrument/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/worldwide/stability-instrument/index_en.htm), accessed 2009/01/28

<sup>4</sup> OCHA's predecessor, the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) was founded in 1991 but had a limited mandate excluding humanitarian coordination, policy development and advocacy. Cf. <http://ochaonline.un.org/AboutOCHA/HistoryofOCHA/tabid/4393/language/en-US/Default.aspx>, accessed 2009/01/28

<sup>5</sup> For example through the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) or through Multi-Donor Trust Funds (MDTF)

<sup>6</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:025:0001:0012:EN:PDF>, accessed 2009/01/28

<sup>7</sup> Kauffmann (forthcoming). *Darfur: Action Contre la Faim, the European Commission, the U.S. and the integration of gender perspectives into humanitarian assistance*, in Steets and Hamilton (eds.) *EU-U.S. cooperation in humanitarian assistance*.

Third, governments providing, coordinating and designing humanitarian assistance have established a distinct identity as humanitarian donors. The following factors determine whether a government perceives itself and is perceived by others as a humanitarian donor:

- 1 **Commitment:** The government’s commitment to collectively agreed upon rules and norms, especially the Geneva Conventions and the humanitarian principles as guidelines for humanitarian assistance.
- 2 **Contribution:** A government’s contribution to international humanitarian assistance in terms of overall financial and in-kind donations, as well as non-material input.
- 3 **Coordination:** A government’s participation in relevant decision-making fora and coordination mechanisms, such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, the OCHA donor support group, the CERF Advisory Board and field coordination meetings, and the willingness to channel a significant portion of assistance multilaterally.

The following graph depicts the three dimensions, describing a government’s role as a donor. The smaller the triangle, the more the actor is at the center of the humanitarian system.

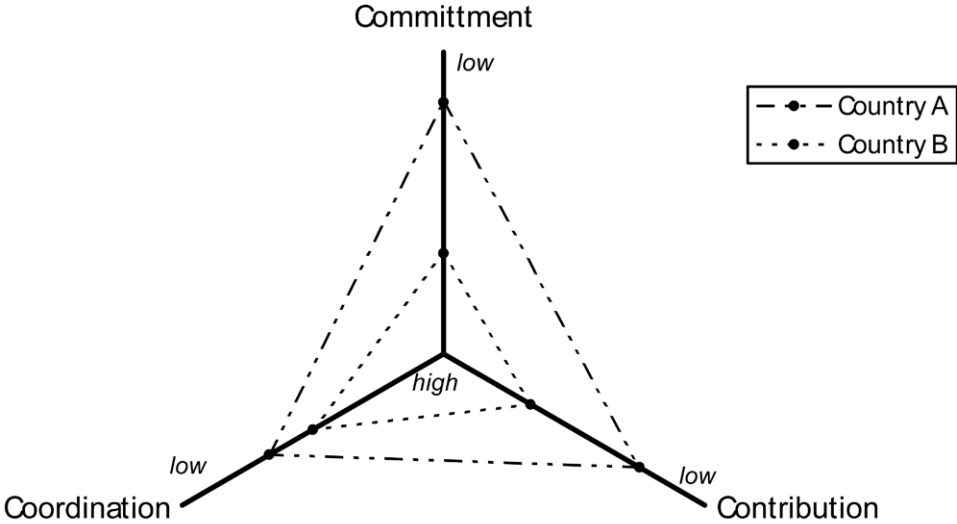


Figure 1: Three dimensions of humanitarian donorship

The other groups of humanitarian actors have also seen a tremendous degree of change over the past decade. For example, NGOs and UN agencies have broadened their mandate and the services they provide to also include protection, advocacy and development/early recovery. They have developed varying approaches to deal with the military and business in humanitarian assistance and have defined their relationship to donor governments in very different ways.

In short, the humanitarian system has experienced a marked increase in actors and activities. As a result, it today addresses more people in need and spends more money for assistance than ever before. At the same time, however, relative to the resources invested, the performance of the humanitarian system remains widely perceived as insufficient and a common understanding of what constitutes humanitarian assistance has been lost.

Consequently, different actors rely on the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality, once purely operational principles, to establish their joint identity as humanitarians. However, translating the principles into norms that guide the behavior of very different types of actors is difficult. How, for example, is a government supposed to act impartially? Furthermore, the proliferation of activities can in many cases not be reconciled with the humanitarian principles. A humanitarian NGO cannot advocate for the human rights of the Darfuris and, at the same time, establish itself as an impartial humanitarian actor in Sudan.

This simultaneous movement towards the principles and away from them creates an ambiguous situation where commonly shared beliefs and action increasingly drift apart. This gap between words and deeds undermines the system's efficiency and challenges the humanitarian space which is indispensable in gaining access to the populations in need.

The analysis whether China wants to join and is welcomed to join the humanitarian system must therefore consider China's position towards the humanitarian principles as a common philosophy and guiding norm. In the following, this paper analyzes the changing role of China within the humanitarian system and the possible development of its identity as a humanitarian donor based on the three dimensions (commitment, contribution, coordination) introduced above.

### III. China's changing approach to humanitarian assistance

*"In the face of great natural disasters, the people of all nations should support each other, should share the same vessel when crossing a river."*

(President Hu Jintao, May 2009)

China's leadership has shown limited interest in integrating China into mechanisms of multilateral humanitarian coordination in the past. In recent years, however, a gradual change can be observed in China's approach to humanitarian assistance. This section examines initial evidence of these adjustments and presents a set of causes that can, to some extent, explain China's subtle change in behavior.

#### Earlier approaches

In the past, China's behavior in international humanitarian assistance largely followed the noncommittal stance that China characteristically displayed with regards to most areas of multilateral collaboration. China's monetary contributions to humanitarian assistance were low in absolute, as well as relative, terms compared to its overall gross domestic product.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, the country typically granted selective and targeted contributions directly to a small circle of recipients, bypassing multilateral mechanisms. This circle mainly consisted of strategic allies like North Korea or crucial suppliers of natural resources like Sudan. That is, in clear breach of the humanitarian principle of impartiality, virtually all of China's humanitarian contributions served a narrow foreign policy objective with humanitarian considerations taking a subordinate position.

Using humanitarian assistance as a narrowly targeted foreign policy tool is also incompatible with international coordination in a very practical sense, since it

requires tight national control over amounts, recipients and timing of assistance in order to establish a direct link between the contribution and its desired foreign policy impact. By contrast, multilateral integration presupposes the relinquishment of a substantial amount of control over the use of contributions, making them unsuitable for targeted foreign policy making. Consequently, the predominance of foreign policy motives in China's approach to humanitarian assistance effectively prevented China's integration into multilateral mechanisms.

Regarding its commitment to international humanitarian norms, China fulfills the minimum standards of having signed and ratified the Geneva Conventions. It also used to occasionally refer to the humanitarian principles, particularly and not surprisingly, to the principle of neutrality.<sup>9</sup> China also referred time and again to the importance of international solidarity, harmony and unity.<sup>10</sup> In practice, however, there has been little evidence of China filling these norms with life by consistently reflecting them in its humanitarian behavior, particular in humanitarian situations linked to armed conflict.

In recent years, however, a gradual adaptation of activities can be observed. This includes China's changing response to international emergencies, as well as its voting behavior within international institutions. For example, China voted for the inclusion of the Oslo Guidelines on the use of military and civil defence assets in disaster relief in the 2008 United Nations General Assembly humanitarian resolution, thus siding with traditional donors and opposing the position of Egypt, India, Cuba and others. A further and particularly telling example of a trend towards an increased Chinese engagement in international humanitarian assistance was China's response during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.

<sup>8</sup> <http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/pageloader.aspx>, accessed 10 December 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Statement by Ambassador Liu Zhenmin at the Open Debate of the Security Council on "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts", 20 November 2007, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjz/zwjg/zwbdt382818.htm>, accessed 25 June 2009, and Statement by Minister Counsellor Yao Wenlong to the Humanitarian Affairs Segment of the 2008 Substantive Session of the ECOSOC, New York, 5 July 2008, <http://www.china-un.org/eng/smhwj/2008/t475430.htm>, accessed 25 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Ambassador Liu Zhenmin at the 5655th meeting of the UN Security Council, S/PV.5655, April 4th, 2007, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Sudan%20SPV5655.pdf> accessed 25 June 2009 and at the 5792nd meeting, S/PV.5792, 6 December 2007, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Somalia%20S%20PV%205792.pdf>, accessed 25 June 2009.

## Observing change: Indian Ocean tsunami and Wenchuan earthquake

On 26 December 2004, the Indian Ocean earthquake and resulting tsunami caused terrible devastation in South and Southeast Asia. China's response to the disaster revealed a clear deviation from its traditional pattern of providing external humanitarian assistance. With financial and in-kind assistance totaling approx. 1.3 billion Renminbi (ca \$157 million), China's assistance efforts were of an unprecedented size,<sup>11</sup> placing it first amongst developing nations.<sup>12</sup>

While the quantitative increase in assistance is notable, the more radical deviation from past behavior lies in the mode of the Chinese government's fund dispersion. For the first time, China channeled humanitarian donations (ca. \$19.5 million) through multilateral mechanisms, mainly UN agencies, displaying an unparalleled degree of participation in international efforts. The intention of this shift in China's approach was prominently illustrated by a large number of public statements, emphasizing the "sincerity of the Chinese government to participate in international relief."<sup>13</sup> In addition, the devastation caused by the tsunami also revealed great compassion and solidarity among the Chinese population leading to the largest amount of Chinese private donations ever given in response to a disaster outside China.<sup>14</sup>

Following the 2004 tsunami, further actions confirm the assumption of an intentional change in China's approach to humanitarian assistance. The 11th Five-Year-Plan, providing national political guidelines for the years 2006-2010, features a section on disaster

relief explicitly highlighting the trans-border nature of disasters and the importance of multilateral cooperation. China has progressively increased its involvement in regional frameworks of humanitarian assistance like the Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADPC) or the Hyogo framework. It also intensified its engagement in respective UN agencies. For example, in 2005, China more than doubled its contributions to the World Food Programme<sup>15</sup> and for the first time actively participated in the OCHA donor support group's annual partnership meeting in Seoul 2007. China also continued to gradually step up its engagement in international disaster response. During the Kashmir earthquake of 2005, China offered approx. \$6 million of emergency aid and deployed emergency rescue teams. When cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, China emerged as one of the largest donors with a contribution of approx. \$10 million.

On 12 May 2008, a devastating earthquake originated in Wenchuan County in the Chinese province of Sichuan, leaving more than 70,000 people dead. In the aftermath of the earthquake, a fierce controversy erupted over the corruption-plagued nexus of Chinese regional government and local construction companies causing wide-spread faulty structures of public buildings, which led to the collapse of many schools and a tragically high number of fatalities among school children during the incident. China's immediate response to the disaster, however, garnered a lot of international acknowledgment. National and international media and experts perceived China's effectiveness in handling the crisis as exemplary.

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<sup>11</sup> It has been argued by Western commentators that the unprecedented amount of assistance provided by the People's Republic of China can be explained by a "donation competition" between the People's Republic and the Republic of China. The explanation is based on the fact that the People's Republic, as well as the Republic of China, repeatedly increased their amount of pledged donations, each time to a level higher than the other. While there does not seem to be any conclusive evidence for this claim and the argument is weakened by the fact that indeed all donors increased their amounts repeatedly as the true scope of the disaster became gradually evident, the "Taiwan factor" might have been a motivational factor in the mainland China's decision-making regarding the level of its donations. In any case, this line of argument cannot explain the more structural and ultimately more significant changes in China's approach, namely its choice to use internationally coordinated mechanisms to disperse part of its assistance.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.reliefweb.int/appeals/fts\\_tsunami.html](http://www.reliefweb.int/appeals/fts_tsunami.html), accessed 22 January 2009.

<sup>13</sup> China Ministry of Commerce, Briefing on Emergency Humanitarian aid to Foreign Countries by Chinese Government in 2005 (briefing given by Chen Jian), January 2006.

<sup>14</sup> China daily, Tsunami donation drive in full gear in China, January 2005,

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-01/01/content\\_405306.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-01/01/content_405306.htm), accessed 22 January 2009.

<sup>15</sup> China Ministry of Commerce, World's largest humanitarian agency wants stronger partnership with China (Press release), January 2007.

Significantly deviating from its traditional pattern of dealing with domestic crises, as notoriously displayed during the SARS epidemic of 2003, the Chinese leadership responded rapidly and decisively to the emergency and did not make use of tight information control and intentional disinformation during the Wenchuan earthquake. On the contrary, foreign and domestic media were granted almost unlimited access to affected areas and the authorities provided detailed information about the extent of damage, number of casualties and progress of rescue efforts.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to China's traditional reluctance to allow any sort of international engagement in Chinese domestic affairs, China's leadership warmly welcomed foreign assistance and support, sensibly following a needs-based approach, only accepting foreign assistance that supplemented Chinese existing capabilities.

China's leadership put special emphasis on publicly acknowledging the compassion of the international community and created an explicit link between the earthquake and the broader efforts of international humanitarianism. Commemorating the earthquake, President Hu pledged China's commitment to internationally coordinated efforts: "China's government and people are willing to walk the same road with the international community, increase interaction, strengthen cooperation, [and] jointly deal with all types of global challenges."<sup>17</sup>

### Explaining change: potential motives for China's shifting approach

The cautious changes in behavior and rhetoric neither constitute a long-term adaptation of China's humanitarian assistance policy, nor establish an inescapable path towards China's full integration into the international humanitarian system. However, they indicate an opportunity for more comprehensively integrating China into international humanitarianism in the future. If the international community wants to seize this opportunity, it needs to understand the motives behind China's policy change. Potential motives include a) increasing international reputation and b) enhancing domestic capabilities.

**a) International reputation:** In recent years, parallel with China's economic growth, the Chinese leadership began to increase its involvement in international affairs in order to actively create an external environment conducive to China's development. That is, China has gradually expanded its external profile and influence in the regional and at the global level. With China's return to international politics, increasing international recognition has become an important goal of Chinese foreign policy.

In raising its profile as a regional and global player, China simultaneously addresses different audiences. Vis-à-vis the larger international community, China's aim is to foster the image of a responsible partner in international affairs willing to share responsibilities in return for influence.

Within the group of developing countries (G77), China attempts to strengthen its leadership position by acting as an ardent advocate of developing countries' interests against developed nations.

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<sup>16</sup> The Economist, *Days of disaster*, May 15, 2008.

The L.A. Times, *Amid the tragedy lies opportunity*, May 14, 2008.

The New York Times, *A Rescue in China, Uncensored*, May 14, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Xinhua News Agency, Hu Jintao meets with foreign diplomats to commemorate first anniversary of earthquake, May 12, 2009.

In the regional setting, China strives to create the image of a benevolent regional power, assuming a leadership position without seeking regional hegemony, thereby dispelling widespread fears about the security implications of China's growing economic and military strength.

The most important audience for the Chinese leadership, however, remains the domestic population. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), following the erosion of ideology-based legitimacy during the reform era starting in the late 1970s, has found itself in dire need of new sources of legitimacy. Garnering international acknowledgment as a measure of political success has proven to be an effective source for the party's legitimacy at home.

Internationally, however, the Chinese leadership's efforts to bolster confidence and to credibly establish China's image as a reliable stakeholder within the international system has thus far yielded limited success. China's notoriously poor human rights record, as well as its international behavior that often – as in the case of Sudan – interferes with humanitarian objectives, has instilled a deep skepticism and mistrust in international partners. The field of international humanitarian assistance, especially regarding the response to natural disasters, provides an opportunity for China's leadership to present its willingness to share global responsibilities and to become a sincere partner within the international system.

**b) Domestic capabilities:** A second set of motives for China to engage in international humanitarianism derives from its own vulnerability to emergencies and the Chinese leadership's desire to improve domestic disaster management capabilities. Due to

its geographic characteristics, China is an extraordinarily disaster-prone country suffering from the annual recurrence of devastating floods, droughts, typhoons and earthquakes. The number and intensity of disasters is further aggravated by the impacts of climate change that affect China profoundly. The incurred losses are particularly high in China. Natural disasters affected more than 400 million people in 2005 and generated an average annual GDP-loss of 2.8% for the period of 1990 to 2006.<sup>18</sup> The currently UN Mortality Risk Index ranks China's mortality risk from earthquakes, floods, tropical cyclones and landslides second in the world.

The handling of domestic disaster situations has become one of the most prominent test cases for the Chinese Communist Party's performance. Parallel to other areas of public policy, the Chinese Communist Party has been sensitive to the population's dissatisfaction with the management of disasters. In response, the Chinese leadership invested heavily in its disaster management capabilities like forecast technology, emergency planning and disaster management.

The combination of China's vulnerability to natural disasters and the increase in public awareness regarding government responsibility in disaster management has brought disaster relief to the front and center of the Chinese domestic political agenda. This recent trend also carries significant implications for China's approach to disaster assistance in the international arena. It is widely recognized within the Chinese government that deeper integration into international frameworks opens opportunities for increased knowledge and technology transfer, as well as the exchange of experience and best-practice solutions for disaster management systems.

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<sup>18</sup> Peijun Shi et al., *Integrated Disaster Risk Management of China, Conference paper for the OECD First Conference on the Financial Management of Large-Scale Catastrophes, Hyderabad, India, 26-27 February 2007.*

**All stars aligned: China’s potential role in humanitarian assistance**

The incentives for China to expand its role within the international humanitarian system have shifted significantly over the last decade. The growing importance of asserting itself as a responsible player at the regional and international level in combination with the rising significance of improving domestic disaster management capabilities create a situation strongly conducive to China’s engagement in international humanitarian assistance. The portrayed changes in Chinese assistance-giving behavior suggest the Chinese leadership’s general inclination to adapt its policies accordingly. In China, powerful interests are apparently aligned favoring the country’s further integration into the international humanitarian system, particularly with respect to natural disaster response. This situation represents a remarkable opportunity for traditional donors like the EU and the U.S. to facilitate China’s integration by actively offering the two main benefits China hopes to reap - reputation and capabilities - in exchange for China’s comprehensive commitment to the international humanitarian system and its underlying rules and principles.

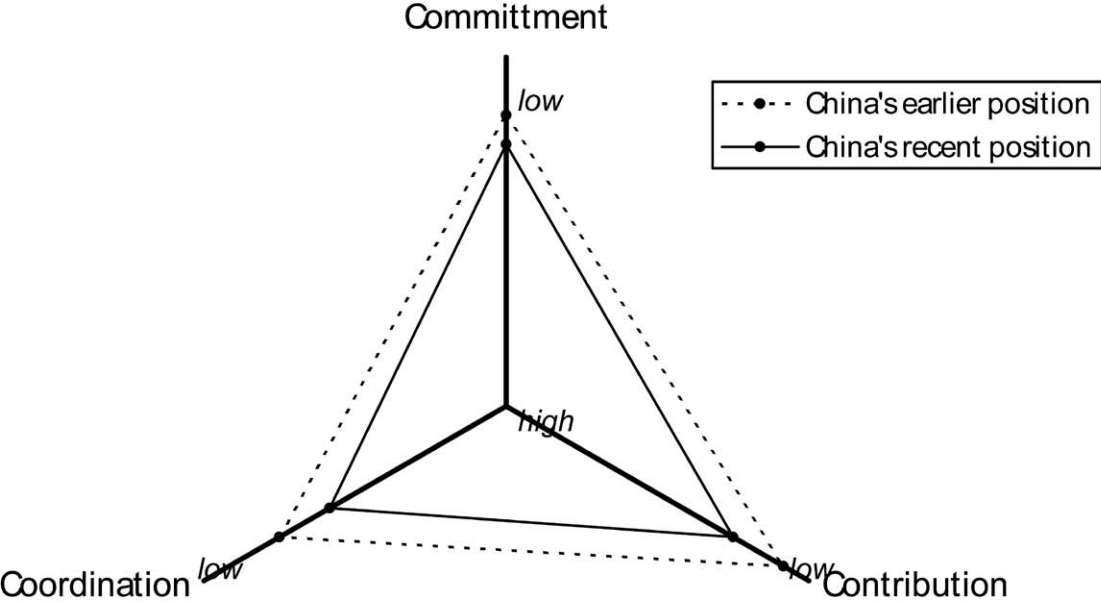


Figure 2: China’s earlier and recent position on the three dimensions of humanitarian donorship

## IV. Traditional donors' changing approach to China

*"I believe given the Chinese experience we have as much to learn from China as China has to learn from us."*

(UN WFP Executive Director James Morris, December 2004)

Traditional donors have in the past regarded China's potential role in humanitarian assistance with great reluctance and skepticism. China's unwillingness to integrate itself into international mechanisms was matched by an unwillingness of traditional donors to integrate China, based on the assumption that there were substantial disagreements on guiding principles and norms. However, as China's behavior has evolved, evidence for an adjustment on the side of the traditional donors is emerging. This section presents initial signs of and drivers for this evolving adaptation.

### From dissociation to rapprochement

In the past, traditional donors have not made any significant attempts to integrate China into international humanitarian assistance. More recently, however, they have gradually recognized the opportunities connected to a more active engagement of emerging donors. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami once again served as a catalyst, bringing China's willingness and its capability to make a contribution to international humanitarian efforts to the attention of the traditional donors. Consequently, after the tsunami crisis was over, the United Nations went to great lengths to cooperate with China in reviewing China's contribution and in drawing lessons from China's coordination with UN agencies.<sup>19</sup> Particularly the World Food Programme strongly advocated for the continued inclusion of China: "We need help from those countries who care and have the capacity, experience and resources, and China is in that category now."<sup>20</sup>

This trend was further substantiated after China's handling of the Wenchuan earthquake, which made many officials in international humanitarian organizations aware that China had indeed improved its domestic emergency response capabilities. The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes was quick to link his recognition of China's achievement to his hope for further engagement: "We think the Chinese government has done an extremely efficient job with immediate relief operations. [...] In the same way, China can help other countries when they are suffering from problems."<sup>21</sup>

### Explaining change: potential motives for traditional donors' shifting approach

The proponents of an inclusive and effective multilateral system of humanitarianism have a number of strong reasons to facilitate China's further integration. If done well, incorporating China into existing humanitarian mechanisms opens opportunities to strengthen a) the legitimacy and b) the effectiveness of the international humanitarian system.

**a) Strengthening legitimacy:** One of the major challenges to the legitimacy of the international humanitarian system to date is the perception of humanitarian assistance as a purely Western undertaking, based on Western interests, ideals, norms and rules. This skepticism regarding the universality of international humanitarian assistance threatens to undermine international humanitarian efforts. The inclusion of China, representing one of the leading nations among developing countries, will constitute an important step towards a broader acceptance of the humanitarian system's legitimacy. A successful integration of China could serve as proof for the traditional donors' willingness and capability to be flexible and open-minded, to value new ideas and

<sup>19</sup> UN China report, *Tsunami response – A review of China's contribution to the United Nations response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami*, January 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Executive Director of the World Food Program, James Morris, January 2007, quoted at <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/newsrelease/commonnews/200701/20070104288762.html>, accessed 25 June 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Xinhua News Agency, UN hopes for larger Chinese role in multilateral humanitarian efforts, April 23, 2009.

approaches and to accept emerging players as equal partners.

**b) Increasing effectiveness:** The integration of China could also enhance the effectiveness of international relief efforts. The most direct benefit from China's engagement would be the added infusion of funds available for multilaterally coordinated activities, the sum of which could expand significantly in the medium-term future, due to the continuing rise of China's economic importance. China's involvement would also aid the traditional donors' desire to spread the burden and responsibilities of humanitarian assistance more widely and enhance regional mechanisms of coping with humanitarian emergencies.

Moreover, as one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, China possesses significant experience, both positive and negative, in managing natural disasters by utilizing the means and capabilities of a low to middle income country. Including China into multilateral mechanisms of cooperation could provide mechanisms for systematically sharing this experience and transferring knowledge to other low and middle income countries facing comparable challenges.

With regards to the regional context of East Asia, China's inclusion into the international humanitarian system would add a great wealth of cultural expertise to humanitarian activities in the area. Close cooperation with China could provide a deeper understanding of different cultural contexts in Asia. It could also help to increase sensitivity towards underlying domestic values and customs that might interfere with or benefit the current approach to humanitarian assistance. After all, knowledge of cultural context is an indispensable element for an efficient and dignified interaction with affected populations.

## V. Barriers to change

*“There are several opportunities to improve the existing and future UN-China joint disaster response capacity.”*

(UN-China Tsunami Response Report 2007)

Both, the Chinese leadership and the humanitarian system, could benefit from an increased Chinese engagement in multilateral humanitarianism. But thus far, the process of mutual rapprochement is only beginning. The opportunity to integrate China has not yet been fully grasped. In part, this is because both sides do not place sufficient emphasis on the policy area of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, significant barriers exist that actively counteract Chinese engagement. Consequently, the convergence of China and traditional donors is far from inevitable. Active efforts must be made on both sides in order to dismantle existing barriers and to nourish and seize the favorable momentum. Since a targeted strategy to reduce existing barriers will be a necessary step towards this goal, this section is dedicated to identifying these barriers.

### China's barriers to increased engagement

China's continued integration into international mechanisms of humanitarian assistance faces barriers in all three dimensions of humanitarian assistance as outlined in section 2: the commitment to humanitarian principles, material and non-material contributions and the level of coordination of humanitarian activities.

**Commitment:** For decades, China has utilized humanitarian assistance as a targeted tool to achieve foreign policy objectives on a selective basis. While this may ultimately hold true for many donors, China's approach has always been particularly specific in its intentions, mostly displaying a clear and unconcealed connection between its assistance-giving and concrete foreign policy demands.<sup>22</sup> This use of humanitarian assistance as a foreign policy

tool is clearly at odds with the central humanitarian principle of impartiality, i.e. the giving of assistance solely based on need.

In addition, strict adherence to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs has been, with a couple of notable exceptions, the most steadfast pillar of Chinese foreign policy over the past few decades. This strict interpretation of the Westphalian order puts China at odds with parts of the international community, which are gradually moving towards a more differentiated understanding of state sovereignty in the light of new challenges.

**Contribution:** China's engagement in terms of absolute monetary and in-kind contributions is limited by its overall current economic capacity. This capacity is likely to further increase in the medium-term future. More importantly, however, China's contributions in relative terms (assistance-to-GDP) are still at a very modest level, reflecting the Chinese leadership's policy and spending prioritization to date.

**Coordination:** One of the most important barriers to an enhanced international coordination of China's humanitarian activities is the sheer lack of coordination capability, i.e. mechanisms of information exchange, direct channels of communications, pre-defined processes of coordination in case of emergencies etc. The 2007 UN-China joint report in fact highlights this challenge. It especially stresses the deficiency of clear channels of communication between UN relief agencies and the respective Chinese bureaucratic entities, as well as the lack of “processes in the management of China's funds allocated through the UN system.”

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<sup>22</sup> For example the switching of diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China.

## Traditional donors' barriers to increased engagement

**Commitment:** The willingness of traditional donors to permit China's increased integration into the humanitarian system are more or less all symptoms of an overarching skepticism towards China, based on its continuous support of human rights violating regimes around the globe, as well as its dismal domestic record on human rights. Because of this, traditional donors fear that an increase of China's influence on the humanitarian system and its norms might corrupt the humanitarian principles. This lack of trust manifests itself also in the other two dimension of humanitarian assistance.

**Contribution:** In terms of material and non-material contributions, traditional donors may harbor concern to be out-done by China in the long-run, diminishing their own influence within the humanitarian system.<sup>23</sup> Traditional donors might be reluctant to facilitate an increased level of coordination, because they might fear that China will act as a spoiler once it becomes part of the humanitarian system.

**Coordination:** Additionally, the international system of humanitarian assistance simply lacks the capability for coordination with China, just as the Chinese bureaucracy does vice-versa, as again highlighted by the 2007 UN-China review report.

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<sup>23</sup> Given the current size of China's contributions, such concerns would most probably be unwarranted in the foreseeable future.

## Vi. Policy recommendations

China's integration into international mechanisms of humanitarian assistance promises to generate important benefits for all parties involved, but at the same time faces fundamental obstacles that will not yield easily. Decisive and targeted political action will have to be taken in order to create a mutually beneficial

pattern of cooperation. To achieve this goal, policy measures will have to maximize the potential benefits that both sides wish to realize and at the same time lower existing barriers that hamper cooperation. The benefits and barriers identified in this paper can be summarized as follows:

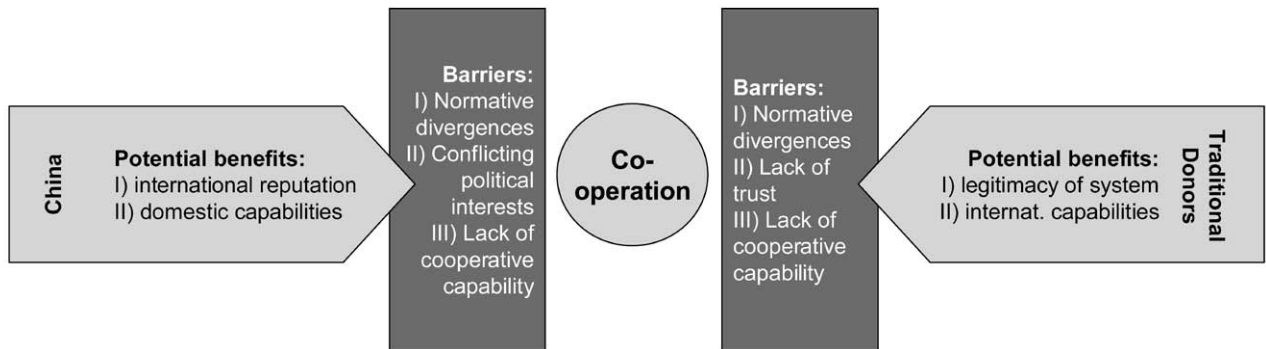


Figure 3: Benefits and Barriers

To address these barriers, we recommend three strongly interdependent steps: First, simply bypass some of the normative divergences during an initial stage of cooperation by selecting less contentious areas of cooperation (portfolio approach).

Second, reverse the vicious trust-cooperation cycle by an upfront investment in cooperative capabilities. Third, maximize cooperation benefits in the portfolio areas through active acknowledgment of the Chinese engagement, joint initiatives, and increased Chinese commitment and contribution.

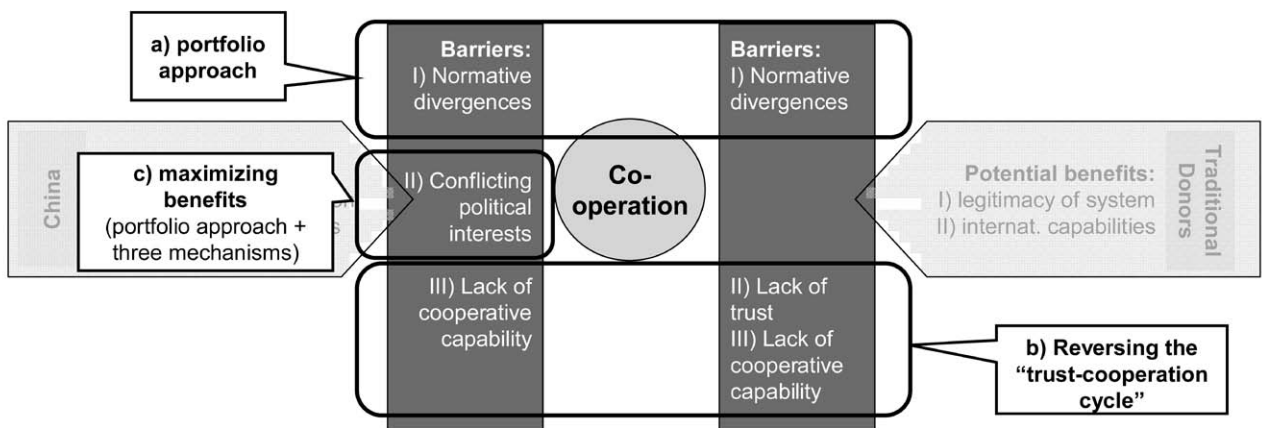


Figure 4: Recommendations

## The portfolio approach

A fundamental dilemma hampering cooperation with China is the necessity of an initial “leap of faith” on both sides. Based on the findings presented in this paper, the normative differences regarding the humanitarian principles are not as unbridgeable as they are often perceived. But for the time being, the strong perception of these divergences effectively prevents the genesis of a meaningful dialogue that is needed to solve normative differences, creating a situation of deadlock. To establish a cooperative pattern that will eventually facilitate a fruitful normative dialogue, some of the normative divergences should be by-passed during an early stage of cooperation.

In order to break the deadlock, a promising area of cooperation within the broader realm of humanitarian assistance should be identified as a starting point. This area might be limited in scope, but should allow for maximizing benefits while keeping the potential for normative conflict to a very minimum. A clearly defined initial portfolio for cooperation can serve as a testing ground for building cooperation capabilities and mutual trust. This can prepare the ground for a more open and more sincere exchange on normative issues at a later stage. The identification of the appropriate portfolio therefore becomes the first step of a comprehensive strategy of engagement. The appropriate portfolio should be chosen according to a three-layered selection filter:

### Layer 1 – Type of humanitarian situation:

The foremost objective of the portfolio approach is to minimize the potential for normative friction. Integrating China into international mechanisms of humanitarian assistance in the context of natural disaster response provides a particularly promising starting point. Aiding affected countries suffering from the impact of natural disasters is normatively less sensitive than reacting to conflict situations. The most pronounced normative divergences between China and traditional donors, originating from different interpretations of state sovereignty and non-interference, are less prominent in most cases of natural disasters. Focusing on natural disasters in a first stage of cooperation can thus considerably lower one of the most persistent initial barriers. In addition, especially regarding current and future impacts of climate change, natural disaster response will continue to gain importance and to draw considerable resources of multilateral humanitarian assistance, making this area also particularly suitable for maximizing the benefits that can be gained by increased Chinese engagement.

### Layer 2 - Type of disaster:

China is particularly vulnerable to floods and droughts and needs to develop mitigation capabilities in these areas. This favors cooperation with China regarding floods and droughts. The prevalence of catastrophic flooding in China’s southern provinces, as well as disastrous droughts in its northern and central regions, put China in dire need of enhanced predictive, protective and responsive capabilities. Intensified international cooperation, facilitating the transfer of knowledge and technology, therefore promises especially high benefits for China in these specific areas of disaster response. At the same time, international humanitarian efforts would greatly benefit from broader sharing of burdens regarding these forms of disasters that require high and long-term material and non-material commitment and will in all likelihood occur in increased frequency in the future due to the effects of global warming.

### Layer 3 - Region of disaster:

Following the logic of maximizing benefits for both sides, policy measures aimed at deepening China’s integration should initially focus on regions where China has a long-standing prior involvement and therefore comparative advantages in administering humanitarian assistance. Core regions of China’s existing engagement that are at the same time particularly susceptible to floods and droughts are for example Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Engaging itself in humanitarian efforts to mitigate the effects of severe flooding in the particularly vulnerable Mekong region provides China with an opportunity to contribute to the stability of affected countries and to demonstrate its role as a benevolent regional actor. Taking responsibility within the framework of international efforts to combat the effects of droughts in Sub-Saharan Africa will give China the chance to bolster its role within the G77. At the same time, China’s experience and close relations with many of the countries in question can serve to increase the effectiveness of China’s engagement in humanitarian efforts in these regions.

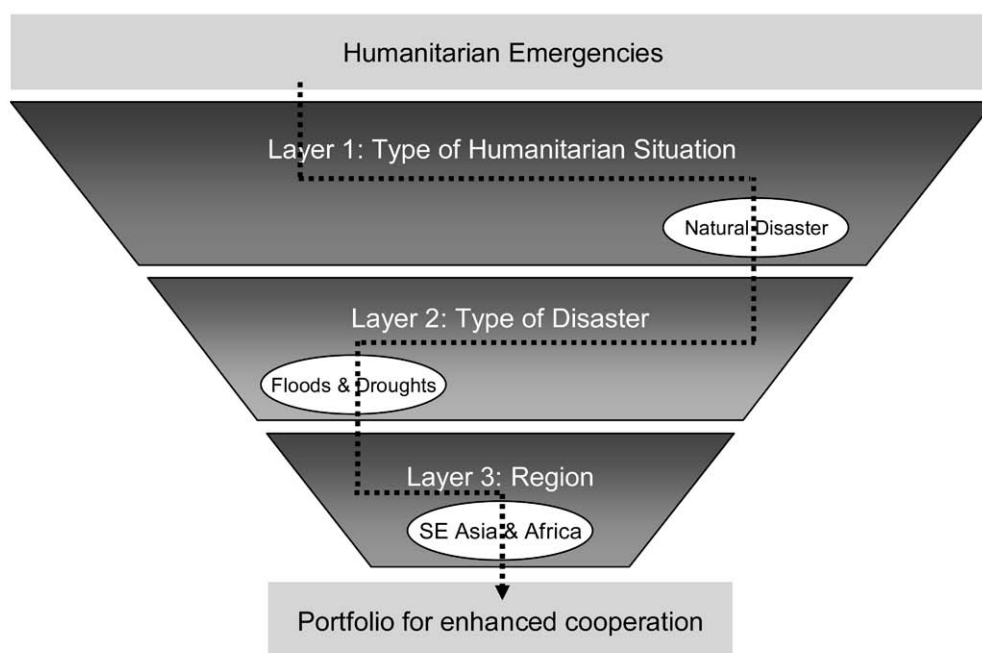


Figure 5: The selection filter

Following the three selection layers of the filter, the specific portfolio that should be used to initially strengthen China's involvement in international humanitarian assistance are **humanitarian efforts with regards to floods and droughts in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa**. This portfolio can serve as a starting point for exploring an increasing Chinese role in international humanitarianism and can become a springboard for future Chinese engagement in other areas of humanitarian assistance.

### Reversing the trust-cooperation-cycle

The portfolio approach is designed to sidestep normative problems during an initial stage of collaboration through the conscious selection of a relatively uncontroversial area of co-operation. Besides normative divergences, the main barriers hampering China's integration into cooperative mechanisms of humanitarian assistance are insufficient cooperative capacity, as well as lack of trust, especially on the traditional donors' side (see figure 2). These barriers in fact form a mutually reinforcing cycle hampering China's further integration into the international humanitarian system:

a) **The first step** of the cycle is the described fundamental **lack of trust** towards China and the traditional donors' deep-seated suspicions regarding the underlying motives guiding China's actions. As stated before, these suspicions exist with good cause given China's

past behavior internationally, as well as domestically. The deriving concern among traditional donors that the inclusion of China into the international humanitarian system will bring about unwanted changes to international humanitarian assistance in the long-run – for example a further weakening of the humanitarian principles – dampens enthusiasm towards China's integration and thereby hampers the emergence of cooperative structures on the technical level.

b) **The second step** of the cycle is in turn the **non-existence of structures of cooperation**, which decreases the efficiency of China's contributions to international humanitarian efforts and thereby lowers the incentive to include China from an efficiency point of view. Moreover, the absence of formal mechanisms of cooperation limits the extent of working-level contacts and information exchange between China and the traditional donors regarding humanitarian assistance.

The complete lack of everyday working-level contacts leads to a deficit of mutual understanding and appreciation, ultimately preventing the alleviation of suspicions. In turn, the lack of trust diminishes the motivation for cooperation, obstructing the establishment of working-level relations and thereby closing the vicious cycle of non-cooperation.

The cycle can be broken by a mutual and concerted effort from both sides relying on active acknowledgement, increased commitment and, most importantly, joint initiatives, to establish structures of cooperation between China and other donors on the working-level. This would provide a basis for increasing mutual understanding and trust while simultaneously enhancing the effectiveness of internationally coordinated humanitarian efforts and creating additional reputation-related benefits for China. Through an initial investment, requiring funds and efforts, but first and foremost a leap of faith, the direction of the vicious cycle could be reversed and turned into a virtuous cycle of self-reinforcing cooperation.

### **Maximizing the benefits**

After identifying the most suitable portfolio for an initial Chinese engagement in international humanitarian assistance and breaking the trust-cooperation cycle, active measures will be necessary in order to utilize cooperation with China to the fullest. The portfolio approach identifies favorable environments for creating high benefits. This test-case needs to be used to demonstrate the immense benefits that can be gained through cooperation to expand the initial portfolio into long-term and lasting patterns of Chinese engagement. Maximizing the benefits will be indispensable for shifting the balance of political interests, the last remaining barrier for cooperation (see figure 4).

Three main mechanisms exist to achieve this goal: 1. active acknowledgement of China's achievements by traditional donors, 2. joint initiatives to build cooperative capabilities and increase the partnership's effectiveness, 3. increased commitment to the underlying norms and rules and material as well as non-material contributions by China to illustrate its added value to international humanitarian efforts.

#### **Active acknowledgment:**

In order to maximize potential reputational gains sought by China, traditional donors should increase their active acknowledgement of China's cooperative behavior as realized within the proposed portfolio. Chinese efforts in humanitarian assistance, as insufficient as they may be, need to be more actively acknowledged by the traditional donors and recognized as a step in the right direction. The selected portfolio of cooperation provides a relatively uncontroversial area for acknowledging China's achievements and a starting point for joint initiatives and collaborative development of disaster response schemes that can serve as a visible platform for recognizing progress. Initial trends toward cooperation should be publicly appreciated in order to demonstrate to China's leadership that cooperative efforts

indeed have the potential to yield the desired reputational effects.

To grant China a higher level of public appreciation with regard to its role in humanitarian assistance is by no means simple. In most Western countries, acknowledging China is unpopular with the electorate due to warranted reservations towards China's authoritarian rule of government and human rights violations. Granting China acknowledgment, even for undisputed achievements, therefore always carries political risk. Political leaders from traditional donor countries need the willingness to risk some political capital in order to facilitate China's integration into mechanisms of international cooperation.

#### **Joint initiative:**

Traditional donors and China should significantly expand their engagement in joint initiatives within the selected portfolio of activities. Capacity building exercises, sharing of knowledge and technology, cooperative development of emergency operating procedures, collaborative research projects and expert exchanges, as well as joint disaster response trainings, provide immense opportunities to create coordination capabilities on both sides. The selected portfolio, requiring long-term emergency management cooperation, is especially well suited to building a stable working relationship and initiate a long-term improvement of cooperative capability.

Increased cooperative capability will prepare the ground for increasing the effectiveness of joint humanitarian efforts by utilizing China's contributions in the most effective way. Joint initiatives will also facilitate the transfer of know-how that will increase the opportunities for China to acquire additional domestic emergency management capabilities through international cooperation. Joint initiative therefore become an irreplaceable building block for engaging China in humanitarian assistance, building the necessary trust and relationship to advance the dialogue on the normative foundations of humanitarian assistance in all types of crises.

#### **Increased commitment and contribution:**

As presented in section 4, the central benefits that the international humanitarian community can gain from China's engagement are an increase in the legitimacy of humanitarian efforts, as well as an improvement of effectiveness through broader burden-sharing and a mutual learning process. China should demonstrate its capacity to increase the humanitarian system's legitimacy and underpin its claim of universality by clearly supporting and strengthening the fundamental humanitarian principles that

it already acknowledges. In doing so, China should utilize its standing and influence among developing nations. China's advocacy on behalf of at least part of the international humanitarian norms would constitute a powerful sign and effectively underline China's increased willingness to constructively engage in multilateral humanitarianism. It would also represent a first stepping stone for an in-depth dialogue on the more controversial normative divergences in the humanitarian arena.

Furthermore, China should prove its capability to improve the effectiveness of international humanitarian assistance by significantly intensifying its contribution to humanitarian efforts, not only in terms of financial means, but also in the form of an active exchange of ideas and concepts, as well as the sharing of knowledge and experience. The demonstration of China's potential to directly and positively impact the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance will facilitate its increasing involvement in the humanitarian system.

The integration of China into mechanisms of global cooperation is a challenge not limited to the field of humanitarian assistance. But humanitarianism, an activity based on commonly shared norms such as solidarity and humanity, is an especially promising arena for an attempt to include China into mechanisms of global public policy-making. In case of success, cooperation in humanitarian assistance, building on common rules and procedures, could serve as a basis for better relations with China in general. Both sides can explore divergences and similarities and jointly develop adequate processes of collaboration that might partly be applicable to a wider field of political issues. After all, traditional donors including the transatlantic partners rightly subscribe to the notion that China's inclusion through integration rather than its exclusion through containment will ultimately lead to the desirable changes in China's international behavior.

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