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China's potential role in humanitarian assistance

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1. Introduction¹

The integration of China into multilateral mechanisms for global problem-solving, turning China from being part of the problem into being part of the solution, is one of the great challenges the international community faces during the 21st century. Efforts to integrate China into international mechanisms of humanitarian assistance are not only more likely to succeed than in other areas of international politics, but also promise particularly high benefits for all parties involved.

This discussion paper, representing initial results of an ongoing research effort, sets out to examine the potential benefits of integrating China into the international humanitarian system as well as the barriers obstructing this integration. Taking both aspects into account, the discussion paper concludes with an initial framework for the development of concrete measures facilitating China's cooperation in multilateral humanitarianism.

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

The Chinese leadership also has considerable reasons to contemplate a deeper integration into the international humanitarian system. Engagement in multilateral humanitarian efforts promises to be an especially high-yield source of boosting China's regional and international reputation, aiding Beijing's desire to gain acknowledgment as a responsible stakeholder of the international system. Furthermore, international cooperation opens multiple avenues for obtaining advanced technology and know-how that would improve China's domestic capabilities to cope with its frequent occurrence of humanitarian emergencies.

Based on the analysis of incentives on both sides, this paper argues that China's integration into the international system promises high potential benefits for both sides and therefore has a good chance of success. It is therefore an endeavor worthwhile pursuing. However, the examination of China's role in humanitarian assistance does also reveal considerable barriers effectively obstructing China's integration into the international humanitarian system. This paper claims that the elimination of these barriers is neither impossible nor prohibitively costly, but will certainly require significant joint efforts from both sides.

The paper concludes by presenting an initial framework for recommendations, outlining the general logic that concrete measures will have to follow in order to successfully facilitate China's integration into the international humanitarian system. The design of these concrete measures represents the next step in the ongoing research efforts on China in humanitarian assistance.

¹ The authors are grateful to Nina Brutzer, Claudia Meier and Clara Weinhardt for their valuable research support, innovative ideas and constructive comments throughout the development of this paper.

2. Describing the International Humanitarian Regime

In order to describe China's potential future role in humanitarian assistance and its behavior in relation to the traditional donors, it is necessary to lay out the present state of the system and to define the dimensions in which behavior can be described and evaluated. The following section provides a first attempt of a conceptual framework for the analysis of behavior within the field of humanitarian assistance and establishes the basis for the following examination of China's role. The framework will be further developed during the course of future research.

I.

In the last ten or fifteen years, humanitarian assistance has developed from a wallflower into a flourishing area of global governance. That is, humanitarian assistance, once the preoccupation of the Red Cross Movement and a handful of non-governmental organizations, has found its way into the foreign policy portfolio of (Western) governments. (Barnett 2005) A growing allocation of foreign aid budgets for humanitarian purposes (Global Humanitarian Assistance 2007) and the proliferation of donor policies on humanitarian issues reflect this trend.

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

First, 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 Afghanistan² and the European Commission's Instrument for Stability (IFS)³ are prominent though very different examples of this development.

Second, governments are beginning to institutionalize their humanitarian response on both national and international levels. Nationally, many foreign offices have created specialized departments focused on humanitarian assistance. The founding of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 1998⁴ is a primary example of the degree to which global institutionalization has occurred. OCHA pooled funding⁵, international norm and standard development fora such as the Good Humanitarian Donor Initiative (GHDI), the development of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid⁶, as well as close cooperation in donor support groups and on boards of humanitarian agencies reflect the degree of global institutionalization. Even at the field level, practitioners occasionally observe a move from pure information exchange between donors to content discussions. (Kauffmann, forthcoming)

² It remains to be seen how the new United States administration will change this approach to humanitarian assistance.

³ http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/worldwide/stability-instrument/index_en.htm, accessed 2009/01/28

⁴ 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

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

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

II.

One way to analytically frame this dynamic world of humanitarianism is to look at it as an international regime.⁷ Building on Stephen D. Krasner (1982) and March and Olsen (2004) we can define the international *humanitarian* regime as *a set of rules, norms, principles and procedures that shape actors' mutual expectations regarding appropriate international humanitarian behavior.*

In more practical terms this means that the humanitarian regime encompasses all humanitarian assistance that is multilaterally channeled and/or coordinated, that is given in the spirit of the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, and impartiality, and according to the standards established through the GHDI.⁸

A humanitarian regime is said to be robust if the underlying rules and norms have a high degree of specificity and commonality. Specificity suggests that the norms and rules clearly prescribe appropriate behavior. Commonality implies that the underlying rules and norms are shared by a wide range of actors (Boekle, Rittberger, and Wagner 1999).

Given these criteria, the current humanitarian regime appears to be rather instable. Many of the norms, such as neutrality, are not only disputed within the humanitarian community but are also not specific enough to guide an actors' behavior in complex contexts. For example, the current norms and rules cannot guide governments sufficiently in how to provide aid in a neutral manner in conflict situations where it is difficult to distinguish between combatants and civilians. (Terry 2002)

Additionally, a considerable – and some studies claim a growing⁹ – amount of humanitarian assistance is neither channelled nor coordinated multilaterally, nor is it given according to established standards. That is, many actors provide humanitarian assistance outside of the humanitarian regime.

Despite those two limitations – the relative weakness of the humanitarian regime and its limited scope – we believe that conceptualizing institutionalized humanitarian assistance as a regime is worthwhile. There are three reasons for this:

First, the concept helps us to describe “what is out there”. It urges us to examine and determine the rules, norms and decision-making procedures that shape humanitarian assistance. By doing so, we get a better understanding of what works and what doesn't in humanitarian governance and why this is.

Second, the concept helps us to reflect on the consequences of change within the regime. What impact will the joining of new actors have on the commonly shared norms and rules? Will new actors contribute towards the stability of the regime or towards the con-

⁷ Framing the international humanitarian system as an international regime is a new idea that has to be further developed analytically.

⁸ The “23 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship” include a definition of humanitarian assistance, general principles such as the needs-based approach and requirements for implementing humanitarian organisations, and good practices in terms of funding, enhancing implementation and learning and accountability. <http://www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/background1.asp>, accessed 2009/01/28

⁹ Cf. Macrae J et al (2002) ‘Uncertain power: the changing role of official donors in humanitarian action’ *HPG Report 12*, Overseas Development Institute, London; Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer: Good humanitarian donorship and the European Union: Issues and options. Background paper prepared for an informal meeting of the Humanitarian Aid Committee, Dublin 25-26th March 2004.

trary destabilize it? What will be the behavior of new actors in the regime's decision-making fora?

Finally, the inherently normative concept can guide us in our endeavour to improve humanitarian assistance. Which rules should be changed? Which norms should be strengthened? How can decision-making become more representative and more efficient? In other words, how should a humanitarian regime look like if it is to efficiently save lives and alleviate suffering of crisis affected populations?

II.

Using the concept of international regimes leaves us with two important questions: First, who is part of the regime and why? Second, how can we delineate the humanitarian regime from non-institutionalized forms of humanitarian giving?

According to literature (Simmons and Martin 2002), all those actors who both consider themselves and who are considered by others as regime members are part of the regime. Empirics tell us that the humanitarian regime currently can comprise public or private actors that belong to one of the following groups: governments, all organizations belonging to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, all humanitarian UN agencies and all humanitarian non-governmental organizations.¹⁰

Since this paper, on the basis of the conceptual framework introduced in part I, will focus specifically on the role of the Chinese government in humanitarian assistance, we will subsequently discuss the factors determining whether a government in question perceives itself and is perceived by others as a member of the humanitarian regime. This perception largely depends on a government's behavior with respect to three dimensions:¹¹

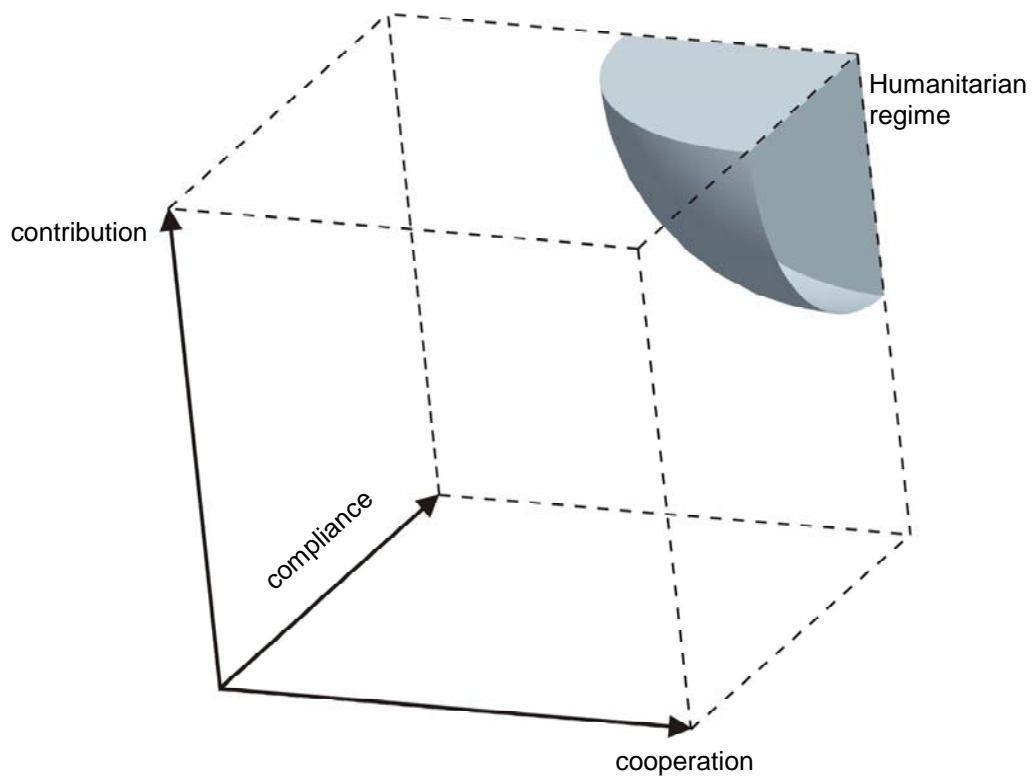
- 1. Contribution:** The amount that a government contributes to humanitarian assistance in terms of overall financial and in-kind contributions. A minimum contribution to be perceived as part of the regime is aid amounting to the equivalent of the annual subscription for the OCHA donor support group or US \$300.000/ per annum.
- 2. Compliance:** The government's adherence to collectively agreed upon rules and norms. Minimum compliance is having ratified the Geneva Conventions and accepting the humanitarian principles as guideline for humanitarian assistance.
- 3. Cooperation:** A government's participation in relevant decision-making fora. A minimum criterion is to fulfill at least two of the following criteria: being member of ECOSOC, the OCHA donor support group, the CERF Advisory Board, and to channel substantial amount of aid multilaterally.

The following graph depicts the three dimensions (a 3C-continuum: contribution, compliance, cooperation) describing a government's behavior within the realm of humanitarian

¹⁰ That is, the regime currently excludes private individuals, business companies (e.g. in form of contractors), foundations, and the military.

¹¹ Obviously, there is no objective threshold that determines the borders of the regime and whether an actor is inside or outside the regime. The above mentioned criteria are therefore based inductive reasoning and are subject to debate. They were established for the purpose of this paper only. Much more research has to be done in order to clearly describe institutionalized humanitarian assistance as a regime and to delineate the regime's boundaries.

assistance and showing the position of above described humanitarian regime, which is characterized by high commitment with regard to all three dimension:



Graph 1: Three dimensions of humanitarian assistance (the “3C-continuum”) and the international humanitarian regime

In the following, based on the three dimension as well as the conceptual considerations regarding the international humanitarian regime as introduced in this section, this paper will concentrate on one specific actor, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), analyzing its changing role within the realm of humanitarian assistance and especially in its relation to the humanitarian regime.

This unilateral focus on China is guided by its rapidly increasing importance as a potential new donor and significant player within the field of humanitarian assistance. It is, however, not to be understood as discounting the importance of other emerging donors like Russia, India or South Africa. In fact, while some of the dynamics described in this paper are very specific to the Chinese context, other arguments are of more general validity and will hold true with regard to other emerging donors as well. Therefore, 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 effects of emerging donors on humanitarian assistance.

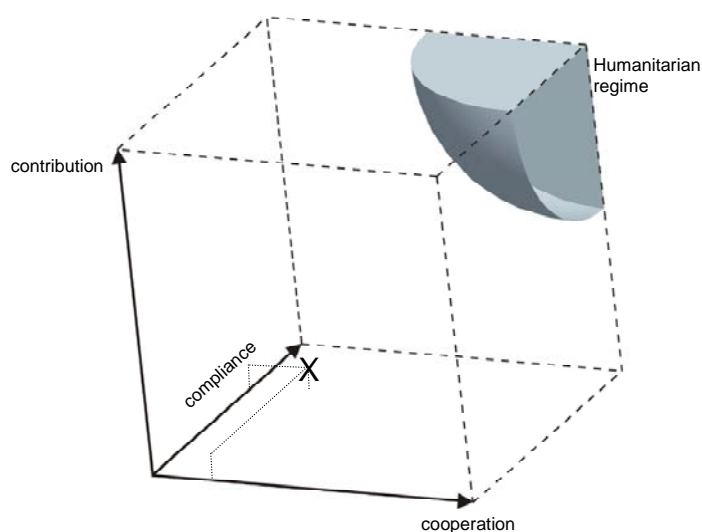
3. China's changing incentives

The following section will first describe China's traditional approach towards humanitarian assistance, i.e. its position within the 3C-continuum, before presenting some initial evidence for subtle changes to this approach that can be observed during the last couple of years. In a second step, it will examine shifts in the balance of incentives (meaning the sum of all factors guiding foreign policy decisions) that might offer an explanation for the cautious adaptations in China's behavior in humanitarian assistance.

I.

China's approach to international humanitarian assistance, which can be classified along the three dimensions of *contribution*, *compliance* and *cooperation*, has consistently placed China outside the mechanisms of multilateral cooperation. In terms of absolute as well as relative monetary *contributions*, a low overall volume has characterized Chinese humanitarian assistance.¹² Regarding its *compliance* to international humanitarian norms, China fulfills the minimum standards of accepting the Geneva Convention and other international humanitarian standards as the guideline of humanitarian assistance, but without consistently reflecting these guidelines in its humanitarian behavior. Most importantly, the strictly bilateral mode of China's assistance-giving, being highly selective and narrowly focused, makes it largely incompatible with existing frameworks of international *cooperation*.

Chinese assistance has traditionally been granted in a selective way, using strictly bilateral settings and thereby consciously avoiding multilateral mechanisms of humanitarian assistance. In most cases China's bilateral assistance has been closely linked to a specific set of national interests. Foreign policy motives guiding Chinese aid-giving behavior include strengthening of ties with strategic allies as well as securing favorable relations with suppliers of natural resources.



Graph 2: China's position within the "3C-continuum"

¹² <http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/pageloader.aspx>, accessed 10 December 2008.

However, while these characteristics and underlying motives certainly continue to exert significant influence over China's mode of humanitarian assistance, a gradual adaptation in behavior can be observed in recent years, suggesting that the factors guiding China's behavior in humanitarian assistance (henceforth "incentives") have undergone certain changes.

In 2004, responding to the devastation caused by the Indian Ocean tsunami, the traditional pattern of Chinese disaster response was altered significantly. With financial and in-kind assistance totaling approximately 1.3 billion RMB (ca \$157 million), China's aid efforts were of an unprecedented size. While the disaster's extraordinary magnitude prompted several countries to pledge record amounts of aid, the sum of Chinese assistance in comparison to its past aid-giving behavior is particularly striking.¹³ In relative terms, Chinese assistance during the tsunami reached approx. 0.0067% of GDP, putting it far behind most developed nations (US: 0.035%; Australia: 0.255%), yet placing it on top of all developing nations (India: 0.0031%).¹⁴

While the quantitative increase in assistance is notable, the more radical deviation from past behavior lies in the mode of aid-giving employed by the Chinese government during the tsunami. For the first time, China channeled significant amounts of funds (approx. \$19.5 million) through United Nations agencies. The extent of China's coordination and collaboration with multilateral relief activities, as described in the 2007 UN assessment report¹⁵, reveals an unparalleled level of Chinese engagement in international mechanisms of humanitarian assistance. The 2004 tsunami surely represents an extraordinary situation prompting extraordinary responses by nations around the world. Regarding China's approach, however, it brought about the first indication for a potentially more fundamental and systematic change in policy.

Following the 2004 tsunami, a growing number of China's actions corroborate the assumption of a gradual, but intentional change in China's approach to international humanitarian assistance. The eleventh five year plan of the PRC, providing political guidelines for the years 2006-2010, features a section on disaster relief, highlighting the trans-border-nature of disasters and the deriving importance of multilateral cooperation in humanitarian assistance. Subsequently, China progressively increased its involvement in international as well as regional frameworks of humanitarian assistance. It cautiously intensified its engagement in respective UN agencies, e.g. actively participating in the OCHA donor support group's annual Partnership Meeting for the first time in Seoul 2007. China

¹³ It has been consistently argued by Western commentators on China's role in humanitarian efforts during the 2004 Tsunami that the unprecedented amount of assistance provided by the PRC can be explained by a "donation competition" between the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC, aka Taiwan). The explanation derives from the fact that the PRC as well as the ROC repeatedly increased their amount of pledged donations, each time to a higher level than the other one. 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 while the true scope of the disaster became gradually evident, the "Taiwan factor" might certainly have been a motivational factor in the PRC's decision-making regarding the level of its donations. In any case, this line of argument can not 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. Therefore, no matter how important the "Taiwan-factor" really was regarding the quantitative dimension of China's changing approach, the validity of a more substantial qualitative alteration of China's behavior remains untouched by this line of argument.

¹⁴ http://www.reliefweb.int/appeals/fts_tsunami.html, accessed 22 January 2009.

¹⁵ UN China report, Tsunami response – A review of China's contribution to the United Nations response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, January 2007.

hosted the 2005 Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction of the 27-member Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADPC) in Beijing, and it increased its participation in several multinational disaster relief initiatives like the Hyogo framework and the Disaster Reduction Hyperbase. In 2005, China also introduced a disaster relief component to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)¹⁶ that has been substantiated through the SCO Action Plan on Disaster Relief Cooperation in 2006. When cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, China not only emerged as one of the largest donors with a contribution of approx. \$10 million. China's regional influence and relations with Myanmar's military regime also proved to be crucial in facilitating at least a minimum degree of international disaster relief efforts.

All these developments are subtle first steps and are indeed still far from constituting a long-term change of China's humanitarian assistance policy. The indicators do however point towards an opportunity for a more comprehensive integration of China into evolving mechanisms of international humanitarianism. China's subtle change in behavior suggests an alteration of internal incentive structures, potentially shifting the balance in favor of an increased Chinese engagement. If the international community wants to seize this opportunity and to actively facilitate this development, it needs to understand the shifts of incentives in order to design targeted approaches to further China's integration.

II.

The incentives for the PRC to increase its engagement in international mechanisms of humanitarian assistance can be divided in two general categories, a) international reputation and b) domestic capabilities. Other factors may play a role as well and might be added during later stages of the research.

a) International reputation: In opening up to the outside world, China has become more exposed to external influences prompting the Chinese leadership to increase its involvement in international affairs in order to actively create an external environment conducive to China's internal path of development. Especially over the last decade, China has steadily expanded its external profile and influence on the regional as well as at the global level. Parallel to the increase in China's economic power, China has intensified its international engagement becoming more directly involved in a broad spectrum of global governance issues ranging from UN peacekeeping operations to international negotiations on climate change. Asserting itself as an active regional and global player has been one of the most prominent features of Chinese foreign policy of recent times. With China's return to the stage of international politics, increasing international recognition and reputation has become an important motive of Chinese foreign policy behavior.

In raising its profile as a regional and global player, China simultaneously addresses different audiences in different ways. Vis-à-vis the larger international community, China's aim is to foster the image of a responsible stakeholder, a reliable 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 opposite the developed nations. In the regional setting, China strives to create the image of a benevolent regional power, assum-

¹⁶ SCO members: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

ing a leadership position without seeking regional hegemony, thereby dispelling widespread fears about the security implications of China's growing economic and military might.

The most important audience for the Chinese leadership remains to be the domestic population. The Chinese Communist Party (CPC), following the erosion of ideology-based legitimacy during the reform era, has been in dire need for new sources of legitimacy. The populations pride in China's recent achievements, such as its economic success as well as the accompanying increase in international weight, has become one of the most important pillars of the CPC's continuous claim to power.

Increasing its international reputation has certainly become a major incentive for Chinese foreign policy behavior. However, the Chinese leadership's efforts to bolster international confidence and to credibly establish China's image as a reliable stakeholder within the international system have had limited success thus far. International reputation is only one of many interests pursued by a multitude of foreign policy actors within the Chinese decision-making system. Actions that promise to increase China's international prestige, like significant efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions, protect intellectual property rights or improve product safety standards, are especially difficult to reconcile with internal interests of powerful actors on the national and the provincial level. In many cases, domestic economic development triumphs efforts to appease international actors and build China's international reputation. Consequently, regarding many pressing global issues the Chinese multi-faceted policy decision-making process produces a noncommittal stance, aiming at minimizing China's concrete responsibilities and thereby undermining China's claim to a position of international influence. China's leadership, unable to fully reconcile diverging domestic interests and perceptions, consistently shies away from investing itself in contentious issues.

In order to credibly raise its international profile and to move beyond the widespread suspicions and reservations it is facing within the international community, China must find areas in which domestic interests are largely aligned internally as well as compatible with international expectations. The field of humanitarian assistance, representing a relatively uncontroversial area on the domestic as well as the international level offers such an opportunity.

b) Domestic capabilities: The Chinese leadership is driven by strong incentives to improve its disaster management capabilities. Due to its geographic characteristics, China is an extraordinarily disaster-prone country. It suffers from the annual recurrence of a range of devastating natural disasters, from floods and droughts to typhoons and earthquakes. The incurred losses caused by humanitarian emergencies, regarding human fatalities as well as economic impact, have always been particularly high in China. Natural disasters alone affected more than 400 million people in 2005 and generated an average annual GDP-loss of 2.8% for the period of 1990 to 2006.¹⁷

In more recent years, disaster management has reached an unprecedented level of urgency and significance within the larger context of Chinese politics. The handling of disaster

¹⁷ 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.

situations has become part of an overarching trend that has been fundamentally reshaping Chinese domestic politics throughout recent decades: the gradual shift from ideology-based to performance-based political legitimacy. In order to justify its continuous claim to power, the CPC must demonstrate its capability to ensure China's success on a broad spectrum of political issues, including humanitarian assistance. In recent years, triggered by extremely poor government performances in handling crises like the SARS epidemic of 2003, disaster management has increasingly become one of the primary dimensions in which party performance is being evaluated.

The establishment of a direct link between disaster management and the stability of the CPC's rule has fundamentally altered the significance of emergency response within the Chinese domestic context. Parallel to other areas of public policy, the CPC has been responsive to the population's dissatisfaction with the management of disasters. The Chinese leadership is keenly aware of the huge potential for public grievance deriving from disasters and the possibility of these grievances seriously undermining the CPC's authority. In response, the Chinese leadership has been investing heavily in its disaster management capabilities. Significant efforts and funds have been channeled into the improvement of forecast technology, emergency planning and disaster management.¹⁸

The combination of China's vulnerability to the impact of disasters and the increase in public awareness regarding government responsibility in disaster management has brought disaster relief to the front and centre of the Chinese domestic political agenda. This recent trend also carries significant implications for China's approach to disaster assistance in the international arena. The potentially beneficial influence of closer international cooperation on domestic disaster management capabilities has been widely recognized within the Chinese government. Deeper integration of China into international frameworks would open opportunities for increased knowledge and technology transfer as well as the exchange of experience and best-practice solutions regarding the structures and processes of disaster management systems. The particular characteristics of disasters like typhoons or epidemics, constituting transborder challenges, highlights the benefits for domestic capabilities that might arise from closer transnational cooperation.

III.

The incentives for China to amplify its role within the international humanitarian system have been significantly altered over the last decade. The growing importance of asserting itself as a responsible player on the regional and international level in combination with the rising significance of improving domestic disaster management capabilities create a situation conducive to China's engagement in international humanitarian assistance. Changes in Chinese aid-giving behavior suggest the Chinese leadership's inclination to adapt its policies according to the shifting balance of incentives. In China, powerful interests are seemingly aligned favoring China's integration into the international humanitarian system. This situation represents a remarkable opportunity for the international community to facilitate the described developments by actively offering the two main incentives, reputation and capabilities, in exchange for China's commitment to international humanitarian assistance.

¹⁸ Ibid.

4. Traditional donors' changing incentives

Parallel to the observations of section 3, the following section will describe the traditional donors' approach vis-à-vis China in humanitarian assistance as well as highlight evidence for subtle changes of this approach. Secondly, it will analyze the shifts of incentives on the side of traditional donors.

I.

In the past, interactions between the traditional donors of the humanitarian system and China have been exceptionally limited. While China has shown no efforts to coordinate its humanitarian efforts through multilateral channels, the traditional donors have likewise not displayed any attempts to further China's integration into international efforts. However, more recently the opportunities connected to the more active engagement of the emerging donors have been gradually recognized and more intensely discussed within the group of donors constituting the humanitarian regime. For example, after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the UN system went to great length to cooperate with China in reviewing and evaluating China's contribution during the tsunami and outlining paths of future collaboration. As is the case with China's approach towards the system of traditional donors, the traditional donor's approach towards China features a certain degree of cautious momentum.

II.

Just as the Chinese leadership has considerable reasons to increase its integration into international mechanisms of humanitarian assistance, the proponents of an inclusive and effective multilateral system of humanitarianism also have strong incentives to facilitate China's further integration. Including China into existing humanitarian mechanisms opens opportunities to strengthen both the *a) legitimacy* and *b) effectiveness* of the international humanitarian system. As an additional benefit, Chinese engagement in international humanitarian assistance will potentially serve as a catalyst for the *c) overall improvement of cooperation with China in other areas of global governance*.

a) Strengthening legitimacy: One of the major challenges to the legitimacy of the international humanitarian system is the perception that humanitarian assistance is a purely Western undertaking, exclusively based on Western motives, ideals, norms and rules. This skepticism regarding the universality of international humanitarian assistance, widely expressed among non-Western countries, threatens to undermine the very basis for international humanitarian efforts.

The inclusion of China, representing one of the leading nations within the group of developing countries, will potentially constitute a major step towards a broader acceptance of the humanitarian system's legitimacy, strengthening the *compliance dimension* of international humanitarian assistance. A successful integration of China, which traditionally has been particularly reluctant to join Western-dominated mechanisms of cooperation, could serve as proof for the traditional donor's willingness and capability to be adaptable and open-minded, to value new ideas and approaches and to accept emerging players as equal partners. The result could potentially be a more legitimate, more broadly supported international system of humanitarian assistance.

b) Increasing effectiveness: The integration of China would presumably enhance the effectiveness of international humanitarian efforts not only through an increase in legitimacy, but also through additional effects on the actual quality of humanitarian activities. The most direct benefit from China's engagement would be the added infusion of funds available for multilaterally coordinated activities which, if used efficiently, have the potential to strengthen effectiveness of humanitarian efforts (*contribution dimension*). In the light of China's increase in economic prowess, which might face a downturn due to the current health of the global economy, but is still unlikely to be reversed in the mid-term future and will in any case most probably outpace economic growth in traditional donor countries¹⁹, the weight of this aspect will probably be amplified significantly in the near and medium-term future.

In addition to this purely material aspect, China's integration into international mechanisms would most significantly augment the system of humanitarian assistance in the *cooperation dimension*. China's importance and influence among developing nations, which are of course also most vulnerable for humanitarian emergencies, can potentially improve access to and coordination with these countries in case of humanitarian crises. Especially in regards to China's relationships with regimes that maintain little or no ties with Western governments, Chinese involvement could provide a valuable entry point for delivering assistance into these countries. China's role during the cyclone Nargis in Myanmar has been a case in point. In other political areas, China has cautiously shown a certain degree of willingness to act as a broker between Western nations and pariah states, most significantly during the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. In the field of humanitarian assistance, Chinese intermediation could bring desperately needed help to populations who might otherwise be excluded from international assistance.

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 would provide a promising mechanism for systematically sharing this experience and transferring knowledge to other low and middle income countries facing comparable challenges, increasing their internal emergency management capabilities. In addition, a process of mutual learning and knowledge transfer between China and the traditional donor's can also increase the traditional donor's ability to provide external humanitarian assistance to low and middle income countries.

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 act as a valuable source for a deeper understanding of different cultural contexts in Asia and for increasing the sensibility towards underlying values and customs that might interfere with or be beneficial to humanitarian assistance efforts by the traditional donors. Since knowledge of cultural context is indispensable for an efficient and dignified interaction with affected populations, the additional expertise gained by China's integration is likely to increase the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian assistance in East Asia.

c) Improving overall cooperation with China: The integration of China into mechanisms of global cooperation is a challenge not limited to the field of humanitarian assistance. But hu-

¹⁹ Even if China's economic growth is seriously slowed by the global economic crisis, it is highly unlikely to be impacted more severely than that of most other countries resulting in a continuation of China's increase in **relative** economic power in the medium term future.

humanitarianism, still representing an area of “low politics” with limited potential for conflict between governments, is an especially promising political arena for an attempt to include China into mechanisms of global public policy-making. In case of success, cooperation in humanitarian assistance could serve as a basis for further improvements of collaboration with China. Using humanitarian efforts as a low-risk test-case, 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. In this way, humanitarian cooperation can prepare the ground for a more comprehensive Chinese involvement on a broad spectrum of global governance issues, from peacekeeping to carbon emissions reduction.

III.

The combination of incentives from the Chinese perspective to increase engagement in international humanitarian assistance and the incentives on the part of the traditional donors to include China into the multilateral mechanisms of cooperation amounts to a distinctly favorable starting point for China’s integration into the humanitarian regime.

However, as will be described in the following sections, this opportunity will have to be actively seized to become a reality. Despite the overall favorable incentive structure, barriers to cooperation do persist and will have to be deconstructed through mutual efforts.

5. Barriers to change

Both the Chinese leadership and the traditional donors could greatly benefit from an increased Chinese engagement in international humanitarian assistance efforts. But the process remains in nascent stage and the opportunity to integrate China has not yielded substantial results thus far. In part, this is due to the insufficient emphasis put on the existing incentives favoring China's integration. Moreover, it reflects the existence of significant barriers that counteract Chinese engagement. Consequently, the convergence of China and the international humanitarian system is far from being inevitable. Hence, active efforts must be made on both sides in order to nourish and increase the momentum that has been outlined in previous sections. Since a targeted strategy to lower existing barriers will be a necessary step towards this goal, this section will be dedicated to identifying these existing barriers.

The first part of this section (I) will describe the existing barriers constraining China's willingness and/or capacity to increase its engagement in the international humanitarian system. The second part (II) will turn to the barriers constraining the traditional donor's willingness and/or capability to permit China to increase its level of integration.

I.

Considering the three dimensions of behavior in humanitarian assistance as outlined in section 2, China's engagement in terms of financial *contribution* is, in absolute terms, of course limited by its overall economic capacity. As argued above, this capacity is likely to further increase in the near and medium-term future²⁰. Largely because China is indeed still a developing nation and faces some classically associated challenges and fiscal limitations, humanitarian assistance is not high up on China's list of spending priorities, which likely accounts for the (low) level of its contributions in relative terms (HA-to-GDP). If the incentives described in section 3 become more pronounced, giving China's leadership more reasons to step up China's engagement in humanitarian assistance, the prioritization will potentially be adapted accordingly, ultimately leading to an increase in China's financial contributions.

The most prominent barrier to an increase in China's *compliance* with international humanitarian principles derives from diverging interpretations of nation-state sovereignty. 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 increasingly at odds with significant parts of the international community, which is gradually moving towards a more differentiated understanding of state sovereignty in the light of new challenges. Perhaps the most explicit debate highlighting this rift is the discussion regarding the "responsibility to protect" (R2P), which has very direct implications for the mode and limitations of humanitarian assistance.

Cyclone Nargis and its impact on Myanmar, presenting the international community with a regime that refused to accept desperately needed humanitarian relief, proved to be a

²⁰ For a brief discussion of the effects of the international economic crisis see section 4.

challenging example in which the importance of the “sovereignty debate” regarding humanitarian assistance echoes on. On the one hand, the Myanmar case highlighted the difference in opinion between the traditional donors and China with China underlining its commitment to the principle of non-interference. On the other hand, it very clearly illustrated China’s willingness to work with this divergence in normative judgment, to act as a broker in situations where interpretations of sovereignty clash and thereby to decrease the probability of normative conflict in this area.

Perhaps the most significant barriers to China’s increased engagement exist in the dimension of *cooperation*, one of the barriers hampering China’s willingness to coordinate its efforts more closely, the other one limiting its institutional capability to do so.

For decades, China has utilized humanitarian assistance (as well as development aid for that matter) as a 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 aid-giving and concrete foreign policy demands, such as the switching of diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (aka Taiwan) to the People’s Republic of China. This specific use of humanitarian assistance as a foreign policy tool does require China’s ability to be selective in its distribution of humanitarian assistance. This ability would necessarily be diminished if China distributed greater parts of its humanitarian assistance through internationally coordinated, pooled mechanisms.

While this barrier is likely to remain in place and to keep its influence on China’s decision-making in the medium-term future, it will potentially be decreased by the increasing influence that China might gain from becoming a more active player in the international system. China’s increased international reputation and potentially deriving weight in international institutions might in part off-set the costs caused by a partial loss of humanitarian assistance as a foreign policy tool. Increased engagement in the processes of international cooperation provides a set of alternative tools of foreign policy-making based on deepening multilateral ties, establishment of working-relations with other countries etc. These additional channels of influence will supplement China’s foreign policy tool-kit and in a best-case scenario, gradually diminish the importance of the direct use of humanitarian assistance as a means of foreign policy over time.

The second barrier associated with the dimension of cooperation is the sheer lack of cooperation capability, i.e. mechanisms of exchange, channels of communications, pre-defined processes of coordination in case of emergencies etc. The 2007 UN-China joint report, providing an extensive review of “China’s contribution to the United Nations response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami” does in fact highlight the point that China’s contributions have been unprecedented and laudable, but limited in effectiveness due to its lack of cooperation mechanisms. It especially stresses the deficiency of clear channels of communication between UN relief agencies and the respective Chinese bureaucratic entities, the lack of “processes in the management of China’s funds allocated through the UN system”, as well as the absence of pre-defined list of available items, rosters of available experts etc. This barrier on the one hand particularly obstructs China’s deeper integration into the international humanitarian system. On the other hand it can be entirely assuaged by establishing a comprehensive structure for cooperation.

II.

The barriers that potentially limit the traditional donor's willingness to permit China's increased integration into the humanitarian system are more or less all symptoms of an overarching skepticism towards China that has manifestations in all three dimension of humanitarian assistance. In terms of *contributions*, the traditional donors might harbor concern to be out-done by China in the long-run, diminishing their own influence within the system²¹. The same mechanism applies to the dimension of *compliance*, with traditional donors suspecting that an increase of China's influence on humanitarian principles might corrupt the canon of norms and rules. In parallel fashion, traditional donors might be reluctant to facilitate an increased level of *cooperation*, because they might fear the decline of their influence within the system and suspect China to act as a spoiler once it becomes part of the humanitarian system.

All these concerns are expressions of a general lack of trust towards China based on China's past behavior in the international arena as well as its authoritarian mode of government in the domestic realm. China's continuous support of human-rights-violating regimes around the globe, as well as its dismal domestic track-record on human rights, provide sufficient reason for deep-running suspicions regarding China's motives and future behavior. However, the transatlantic partners largely 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 stance on human rights and other controversial matters. Therefore, the alleviation of mistrust, acting as a barrier to China's integration, should be attempted through a gradual increase of cooperation, building mutual understanding and ultimately trust.

Additionally, the international system of humanitarian assistance simply lacks the capability for cooperation with China just as the Chinese bureaucracy does vice-versa. The 2007 UN-China review report highlights the deficiencies within UN agencies to effectively incorporate China's contributions, due to (as one example) a lack of "UN inter-agency cooperation on sourcing and procurement in China" (UN China report, 2007). Establishing cooperative mechanisms is of course a two-sided process requiring adaptations by both parties and calls for a joint initial efforts carried from China and the traditional donors.

²¹ Given the current size of China's contributions, such concerns would most probably be unwarranted in the foreseeable future.

6. Initial framework for recommendations

The following section will suggest an initial framework for the further development of recommendations regarding China's integration into the international humanitarian system. At this point, the paper will not give a comprehensive compilation of concrete measures that should be taken. The development of these measures will be the foremost task of the future research efforts building on the results presented in this paper. Instead, this section will attempt to examine the overall logic and general direction that future recommendations will have to follow in order to produce the desired results.

As demonstrated in this paper, further integration of China into the international system of humanitarian assistance promises to produce extensive benefits for all parties involved that will most probably outweigh the costs incurred by lowering the described barriers. In order to realize the benefits while reducing the risks and to create an environment that will lead into a mutually beneficial pattern of cooperation, it will be necessary to use two levers: First, **increase potential benefits (I)** and, second, **lower the barriers to collaboration (II)**.

Recapitulation of incentives and barriers	
A) China's incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Increased international reputation▪ Improved domestic capabilities to cope with humanitarian emergencies
B) Traditional donor's incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Strengthened legitimacy of the humanitarian system▪ Increased effectiveness of international humanitarian efforts▪ Improved overall cooperation with China regarding global governance issues
C) China's barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Foreign policy consideration (HA as foreign policy tool)▪ Normative conflict, specifically regarding state sovereignty▪ Spending prioritizations▪ Lack of cooperation capability
D) Traditional donor's barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of trust towards China▪ Lack of cooperation capability

I.

The following sections will outline general guidelines for actions that would **increase potential benefits** from China's integration into the humanitarian system.

a) General guideline for traditional donor's actions

The traditional donors should **increase the reputational benefits** that China can gain through cooperative behavior in the area of humanitarian assistance. Chinese efforts in this field, as small as they may be at this point, need to be more openly acknowledged by the traditional donors and recognized as a positive step in the right direction. While China may still hesitate at participation in multilateral mechanisms, initial efforts should be pub-

licly appreciated in order to demonstrate to China's leadership that cooperative efforts indeed have the potential to yield the desired effect, namely an increase in international reputation.

To grant China a higher level of public appreciation with regard to its role in humanitarian assistance is of course 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 require the willingness to risk some political capital in order to facilitate China's integration into mechanisms of international cooperation.

In addition, traditional donors should **increase opportunities for China to acquire additional domestic emergency management capabilities** through international cooperation. This means expanding existing and creating additional initiatives for mutual exchange of knowledge and technology concerning the prevention of and response to humanitarian crises. Expert exchanges, joint exercises or collaborative research projects are some of multiple channels in which it is possible to facilitate the transfer of know-how and in the end increase the benefits from cooperation for China as well as for the international humanitarian system. Moreover, joint initiatives provide excellent opportunities for raising China's international profile in humanitarian assistance and increases reputational gains as well.

b) General guideline for China's actions

In return, China should **demonstrate its capacity to increase the humanitarian system's legitimacy** and to underpin its claim of universality by articulating its support for humanitarian principles and norms especially among developing nations. China's advocacy on behalf of the international humanitarian system would constitute a powerful sign and effectively underline China's increased willingness to constructively engage in multilateral humanitarianism.

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. China's potential to directly and positively impact the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, for example by facilitating access to internationally isolated countries or by sharing insights about coping with emergencies using the means of low-income nations, needs to be substantiated through example. China has the potential to add great value to international humanitarian efforts. It will have to demonstrate this potential more concretely in order to facilitate its increasing involvement in the humanitarian system.

II.

As described in section 5, some of the barriers hindering China's integration into the humanitarian system are being gradually reduced due to changes in the international system, China's role within this system and shifts in incentives for both the Chinese and Western

governments. As discussed earlier, evidence can be found for a gradually increasing willingness on both sides to work around political and normative divergences. However, two mutually reinforcing barriers remain largely undiminished and constitute a two-step vicious cycle effectively preventing 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 donor's deep-seeded 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 – for example a further weakening of the humanitarian principles - to international humanitarian assistance in the long-run 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 **nonexistence of structures of cooperation**, which does not only decrease the efficiency of China's contributions to international humanitarian efforts and thereby lowers the incentive to include China from an efficiency point of view. The absence of formal mechanisms of cooperation does also limit the extent of working-level contacts and information exchange between China and the traditional donors regarding the field of 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.

III.

In the future **concrete measures** need to be devised which are able to break the cycle by a mutual and concerted effort from both sides. Establishing comprehensive structures of cooperation between China and the international humanitarian system on the working-level 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. The process, once started with determination, would potentially perpetuate itself, increasing the benefits of cooperation and thereby creating incentives for further cooperation – creating its own cycle. 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.

The initial investment of building structures of cooperation connecting China to the existing mechanisms of humanitarian assistance would be very low in comparison to the potential gains it is likely to yield. In light of the increases in benefits described in section 3 and 4, potential returns on investment have never been as high.

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