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China and Typhoon Haiyan: Is Beijing Ready to be a Global Stakeholder?

By Irene Chan

Synopsis

China's initial donation of US\$100,000 in financial assistance to the Philippines was met with scathing response from many international media. Beijing's contribution was compared unfavourably with those from the US, Japan and even private commercial giants such as Ikea and Coca-Cola. Is Beijing ready to be a responsible global stakeholder?

Commentary

BARELY A month before Typhoon Haiyan swept through central Philippines, China launched a major charm offensive in Southeast Asia, a region which has been unnerved by Beijing's aggressive stance over territorial disputes in the region. It is therefore, indeed, baffling to see China shooting itself in the foot with its lacklustre efforts in providing humanitarian assistance to the Philippines.

The general consensus among China observers is that Beijing has missed out on a good opportunity to showcase itself as a responsible power that generates goodwill. Many have pointed to China's recent tensions over the South China Sea dispute with the Philippines as a cause for its apparent snub to Manila.

Blindsided by narrow core interests?

Against this backdrop, one should compare with China's response to disaster relief efforts to the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Six months before the disaster struck, both countries were locked in a major diplomatic dispute over the detention of a Chinese fishing trawler captain involved in a collision with Japanese Coast Guard vessels on 7 September 2010. Regardless of the strong anti-Japanese sentiment at home, Beijing sent over US\$10 million in donations and relief supplies, and was among the first countries to dispatch a 15-member search and rescue team to Japan.

International media outlets such as Time and CNN lauded China for putting aside rivalry to assist a neighbour in distress then. The disaster in Japan gave China an opportunity to show its soft side and to make a statement on promoting responsible international behaviour. This stood in stark contrast with the current controversy with the Philippines and begs the question: how could China be acting so differently towards its neighbours in need?

To answer this question, an understanding of Chinese pragmatism is needed. China's unusually generous assistance to Japan in 2011 can be seen as a pragmatic move to protect its own economic stability, primarily

motivated by the calculation of its core national interests. After all, Japan is China's second largest trade partner after the United States. More importantly, it is one of China's major sources of foreign capital. China's share of Japanese foreign direct investment in Asia was almost 40 percent in 2012, amounting to some US\$7.4 billion. The Philippines is neither a major source of foreign capital nor a major trade partner of China.

Given that China's foreign policy has always been driven by its narrow core interests, it should not be surprising that Beijing would miss out capitalising on Typhoon Haiyan and place little emphasis on disaster relief aid to the Philippines. As noted from the recently concluded Third Plenum in China led by President Xi Jinping, there is a renewed sense of urgency on tackling the challenges of economic reform and maintaining domestic stability.

Therefore, the path of "strategic neglect" rather than that of spending huge sums on foreign aid as a tool for changing international public opinion might have been more appealing to Beijing.

Is China ready to be a responsible stakeholder?

Although China faces calls from the international community to become a responsible stakeholder, most notably from former US deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick, Beijing remains reluctant and selective in undertaking its great power responsibilities. Driven by the "China threat" discourse, Beijing has always been wary of a Western conspiracy to retard its growth and international influence.

A rising China has not hesitated to flex its growing strength to shift the global balance of power in its favour but, in reality, some of its capabilities, particularly the military, have not been really tested, including in disaster relief.

While there is a rising trend for the Chinese military to expand its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions as well as United Nations peacekeeping operations overseas, China remains a relatively new power with little experience in participating in overseas HADR operations and lacks infrastructure to push its aid abroad. China is a paradoxical great power – it boasts of being the second largest economy in the world but has tens of millions of its own people living on less than US\$2 a day. It has a military primed to catch up with the US forces but lacked basic HADR training, equipment and logistical infrastructure to handle the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.

The Chinese domestic media has also debated the country's role and responsibilities as a rising great power. Many in China feel that the country is not ready for great power responsibility, particularly in the provision of public goods to the international community. According to reports, domestic popular sentiment seems to be in overwhelming opposition to Beijing's provision of foreign aid to the Philippines, so much so that the influential *GlobalTimes* published an editorial espousing China as a responsible power and warning that opposing voices should "perceive foreign aid more rationally."

Two key questions on China and disaster relief

One view from the opposing camp is that the international disaster relief system is based on goodwill and should not be taken for granted as an insurance, which kicks in automatically in the event of a crisis. A donor country has the right to offer any amount of foreign aid after considering its own capability (量力而行). Another view holds that China itself suffers from many natural disasters annually and it is also a victim of Typhoon Haiyan, which had also caused extensive damage in southern China. Accordingly, Beijing should do more to channel aid to its affected provinces instead of diverting vast sums of taxpayers' monies towards providing foreign aid.

Following the 2008/09 financial crisis, China has been pushing for a de-Americanised world order as a debt-ridden US takes a step back from its traditionally activist foreign policy. But in the case of Typhoon Haiyan, Beijing expected Washington to call the shots in disaster relief in its backyard while it stays on the sidelines.

This raises two key questions: What happens when a great power does not want to do the things it is expected to do? To whom will the world turn for disaster relief when a still-poor China becomes the world's largest economy?

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