

Humanitarian Aid as an Extension of Sino-American Tensions in Asia

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12 July 2023

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Abstract

Following decades of a bilateral relationship characterized by highs and deep lows, Sino-American relations reached one of their historical lows since the early 2010s. With their current tensions often defined as a “Cold War,” the two states’ political and economic policies have frequently been analyzed as confrontational strategies. This paper aims to build upon this analysis but explore humanitarian aid as a less traditional but increasingly important extension of the aforementioned war strategies. The research question that the paper will attempt to address is: “To what extent is humanitarian aid by the United States and China in modern conflicts in Asia driven by their rising geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions with each other?” In first reviewing existing literature on the topic and then through the lens of Sino-American involvements diving into an in-depth analysis of two case studies: the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar and the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake in Japan, the paper will attempt to highlight underlying trends and correlations of humanitarian aid and strategic planning. Finally, the paper will argue that to a substantial extent, the U.S. and China’s decision to deliver aid takes into account geopolitical and geoeconomic pursuits as opposed to solely humanitarian considerations.

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Introduction

To establish foundational common understandings prior to the following discussions, it is crucial to identify and define some key terms and concepts put forth in this paper. Given the research question, the two most important ideas are humanitarian aid and Sino-American tensions.

In the most general sense, humanitarian aid is providing assistance to alleviate human suffering in the aftermath of natural disasters or man-made emergencies. More specifically, the way the international community generally understands and carries out humanitarian aid is based on guidelines set forth by the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). It posits that all humanitarian actions ought to be based on four humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.¹ Humanity refers to the idea that humanitarian aid's core purpose is to protect the respect for human beings and their life and health. Neutrality and impartiality build off of that in stating that humanitarian actors must not take a side in any conflict and must deliver aid only in a need-based order of priority respectively. Finally, and most relevantly to the topic of this paper, the principle of independence stresses that humanitarian actions ought to be free from all non-humanitarian objectives such as but not limited to political or economic interests. These principles are seen as internationally recognized for they have been formally enshrined in two United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions and further emphasized in numerous resolutions in other United Nations (UN) committees. It is important to note, however, that these principles like nearly all UN agreements are not legally binding for any state. In this paper, the intentions behind humanitarian

¹ *What are Humanitarian Principles?* (2022)

aid will thus be evaluated against these four principles to see if the humanitarian cause is the only reason and goal for providing aid.

With humanitarian aid properly understood, this section will now aim to provide some background information on developments of Sino-American relations in the past as a foundation for later analysis. The U.S.-China relationship was never smooth sailing. Sino-American relations started at a low point when the People's Republic of China was established in 1949 because the U.S. had been an avid supporter of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party against which Mao Zedong's Communist Party fought fiercely in a transformative civil war. Only in the 1970s did tensions begin to ease with the invitation of American ping-pong players into the country, followed by several visits of U.S. officials including that of President Richard Nixon—spurred by so-called “Ping-Pong Diplomacy.” The PRC was later admitted to the UN and the U.S. granted China under the One-China Policy by President Jimmy Carter. At this point, the U.S. had severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan which China had long considered not an independent state but part of its territory. Thus, Sino-American relations were relatively friendly until the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 led to a temporary freeze of U.S. relations with China. As Beijing and Washington worked to rebuild their relationship, however, the 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade as a part of a NATO campaign once again set back the states' relationship with each other. This situation was contentious specifically because it was U.S. Central Intelligence Agency that directed the bombs. While the U.S. claimed it was an error in calculation and that the bombs were trying to target a Yugoslav government agency but hit the Chinese facility by accident—the Chinese people and government saw the attack as a calculated move. Chinese citizens had taken to the streets around U.S. diplomatic and consular missions in

a handful of cities across the country.² While the U.S. apologized for the attack, Sino-American relations took a strong hit despite gradually normalizing trade relations in the early 2000s. In 2007, however, China's military spending skyrocketed and in 2010, it became the second-largest world economy and the largest holder of American debt.³ This was a critical turning point in Sino-American relations as China strengthened its global presence and the U.S. increasingly saw it as a threat to its hegemonic power. This was most clearly seen in U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's outline of a U.S. "pivot" to Asia in 2011. In responding to this paper's research question: "To what extent is humanitarian aid by the United States and China in modern conflicts in Asia driven by their rising geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions with each other," the tensions analyzed will predominantly refer to those that rose following the "pivot." (Given the complex nature of COVID-19 as a pandemic and China's role as the epicenter, this study will exclude from analysis humanitarian aid provided by China in the aftermath of the COVID outbreak.)

Literature Review

Politicization of Humanitarian Aid

Scholars have increasingly studied the general concept of the politicization of humanitarian aid, referring to when political interests influence decisions on such aid since the highly globalized 21st century. One common explanation for why humanitarian aid is politicized comes from the Realist perspective based on theoretical analysis. "From the traditional Realist school which regards international relations as a zero-sum game, by intervening, the donor State

² *Strong Protest by the Chinese Government Against The Bombing...of the Chinese Embassy* (2000)

³ *Timeline: U.S.-China Relations* (n.d.)

maximizes or guarantees its power.”⁴ This statement implies that donor states aid because it grants them an advantage in the zero-sum game, depicting humanitarian aid as wholly a political tool. Fundamentally, Realists argue that all actors act in their own self interest, and humanitarian aid exists as a means to maximize them. Whether it be simply to do good, uphold the trending Liberal and Cosmopolitan standards to obtain international legitimacy, or further diplomatic or economic ties with the receiving country, Realists see the politicization of humanitarian aid merely as a natural occurrence granted that in a system of interdependency, donor states will choose to involve themselves in affairs to extend their influence and maximize relative power. Nonetheless, many scholars have looked to explain the increasing politicization of humanitarian aid beyond the theoretical framework. One argument is that change in the nature of modern conflicts has changed the nature of responses to these conflicts. There is a consensus trending that underdevelopment is the reason for modern-day unconventional warfare such as terrorism, as well as trafficking and refugee crises.⁵ The implication is that underdevelopment is a security threat and therefore a global concern, paving way for developed countries to involve themselves in the affairs of those they deem to need their help in developing. Such justification of their involvement allowed developed countries to leverage asymmetrical power and promote their own agendas and ideologies. For example, “dominant states – such as the U.S. and countries in Europe, who were also the primary funders of humanitarian organizations – were able to bully weaker states in the Global South to accept the humanitarian organizations that they funded.”⁶ Therefore, whether theoretically or practically, one trend in the politicization of humanitarian aid is that in today’s global order where forceful domination is no longer effective in increasing

⁴ Watts, (2017)

⁵ Ehrenfeld, (2021)

⁶ Whittall, (2015)

power or security, humanitarian aid has emerged as a convenient and subtle way to extend influence.

Origins and Trends of U.S. Humanitarian Aid

The U.S. is currently one of the world's largest providers of humanitarian aid. This dates to the Marshall Plan of 1948 in which George C. Marshall, the secretary of state under President Harry Truman, dedicated \$13.3 billion to rebuild war-torn Europe.⁷ The success of this plan in advancing the U.S.' presence and influence in the global arena paved the way for the American efforts in foreign assistance which have grown ever since. Nonetheless, the politicization of aid has been a trend in the U.S. Foreign aid had been an issue with the largest partisan gap as seven in 10 Republicans said that the foreign aid budget should be decreased while just a quarter of Democrats agreed, according to a Pew Research Center study in 2013.⁸ Beyond the partisanship, however, it has been argued that "the decision to grant U.S. humanitarian aid is highly political and strongly influenced by diplomatic alliances, regime types and U.S. media coverage."⁹ In particular, issues such as natural disasters which get more public attention tend to receive more aid as politicians will benefit from appearing to attend to an issue about which citizens care considerably. It could thus be seen that despite the large amount of aid from the U.S., it is certainly more than just concern for those in need abroad that directs U.S. actions.

⁷ Runde, (2020)

⁸ Drake, (2013)

⁹ Dreher et al., (2019)

Origins and Trends of Chinese Humanitarian Aid

Contrary to the U.S., China has not been known as a particularly active donor of humanitarian aid in the past. While the first form of Chinese foreign aid can be traced back to the 1950s when, in an attempt to counter growing American and French influence in Asia, China launched military and food assistance programs in North Korea and Vietnam, it was not until 2011 that Beijing began publishing official statistics on foreign aid which it previously considered classified.¹⁰ Its two competing approaches of noninterference but also a gradual entrance onto the global stage made for uneasy decision-making when it came to providing aid. On one hand, China was struggling with pressing domestic issues such as poverty for much of the late 1900s, and a Chinese proverb states, “sweep your own house before you sweep the world.”¹¹ Beijing did not want to appear to extend its resources to foreign problems while conditions were not yet at home, and it also did not want to set the precedent of intervention overriding state sovereignty for humanitarian purposes. Simultaneously, however, the early 2000s marked China’s growing desire to reach out to the world and make increasing international presence a national agenda and strategy.¹² Accordingly, China provided assistance for natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, the Kashmir earthquake in 2005 and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, but more importantly Beijing focused on establishing developmental projects in foreign countries.¹³ These projects were part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that predominantly focused on economic relations and infrastructure development, but was not often not seen in a humanitarian aspect. In fact, “in 2017, the International Committee of the Red Cross recommended that China’s BRI add a humanitarian dimension to its far-reaching

¹⁰ Wade, (2022)

¹¹ Krebs, (n.d.)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

development agenda,”¹⁴ but for the most part, China does not stand out as a consistent and large humanitarian aid donor internationally.

Methodology

This study looks into two recent issues in Asia requiring international humanitarian aid: the Myanmar Rohingya Crisis and the Japan Tōhoku earthquake. Granted the considerable number of crises receiving international attention since the 2010s, these two case studies do not encompass the full picture of trends in humanitarian aid giving. However, the two cases are chosen for their unique differences that allow for an interesting lens to analyze Sino-American tensions. Given the nature of emergencies and conflicts, no two conflicts will be highly similar. This makes the traditional method of isolating one independent variable and controlling the rest improbable. Thus, rather than attempting to choose two case studies with one major difference to see what its impacts are, this study opts to choose two cases that are drastically different in nature. If the different aspects of what makes up the two cases share no commonalities but the decisions made in providing humanitarian aid regardless similarly show correlations to the Sino-American tensions, then one could predict that both China and the U.S. consider their competition with the other an important deciding factor in offering aid.

The paper will discuss the differences between the situation in Myanmar and Japan that make the two crises fundamentally unique to each other in nature. As a brief overview, most generally, the two differ in that one is a man-made emergency whereas the other is a natural disaster. There is a “perpetrator” of the Rohingya Refugee crisis, but the same cannot be said about the Tōhoku earthquake. There is therefore more necessity and room to take a stance on the

¹⁴ Gonzales & Kurtzer, (2020)

conflict in Myanmar, whereas there is little room but for expressing deep concern and condolences for the natural disaster in Japan. In addition, the existing relationships between China and the U.S. with Myanmar and Japan respectively are largely different given that neither China nor the U.S. have obvious conflicts with Myanmar, but Sino-Japanese relations have been decidedly strained for many years. Considering these differences, there can be nuanced analysis as to whether or not humanitarian aid has become an extension of Chinese and American strategies in their ongoing tensions with each other.

To develop the hypothesis that to a substantial extent, both American and Chinese humanitarian aid to crises in Asia consider the foreseen impacts they have on Sino-American tensions, this paper will analyze the case studies by not just looking into the amount of aid provided by China and the U.S., but more importantly in what form the aid was, how it was channeled the recipient, and what significance and implication it has had on existing diplomatic or economic relations between the donor and recipient as well as between Beijing and the Washington. The analysis will also look into the language used when announcing the giving and receiving of aid to consider the implications of rhetorics in this process.

Case Study – Rohingya Refugee Crisis

Background

The Rohingya people are a Muslim ethnic minority group that has for decades lived in the Rakhine region of western Myanmar (formally known as Burma). Prior to August 2017, the approximately 1 million Rohingya people made up nearly one-third of the population in the Rakhine region.¹⁵ Animosity from Myanmar's Buddhist majority in the state against the

¹⁵ Albert & Maizland, (2020)

Rohingya has persisted since World War II when the Muslim minority sided with the British colonialists and the Buddhist majority sided with the Japanese in hopes that they could help topple British rule. After gaining independence from British rule, oppression against the Rohingya sparked in 1962 when the military staged a coup, rid the Constitution, established a junta, and fiercely promoted a Nationalist Buddhist identity namely through identifying a common enemy—the Rohingya. With the Constitution granting the military 25% reserved seating in the federal, state, and regional legislatures and the power of the Military Commander-in-Chief to declare a state of emergency and thereby put the state under military ruling, the Rohingya population were subject to structural and direct violence. They are officially stateless people having been denied citizenship in Myanmar, bear a 78% poverty rate compared to the 37.5% national average,¹⁶ and faced vigorous military aggression including looting, rape, and murder for years, causing legions to flee from their homes.

On August 25th, 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, an independently formed Rohingya insurgent group, attacked around 30 police and army posts in Rakhine and killed 12 officers. Authorities of the military, known as the Tatmadaw, soon claimed that these were “Muslim terrorists attempting to impose Islamic rule” and declared it would launch anti-terrorism operations.¹⁷ “This is not a terrorist group aimed at striking at the heart of Myanmar society as the government claims it is,” said an adviser to the European Center for the Study of Extremism, Maung Zarni to Al Jazeera in 2017. In the same news report, the Asia Programme Director at the International Crisis Group, Anagha Neelakantan, added that “there was no evidence that ARSA has any links to local or international Jihadist groups, or that their aims are aligned.” Despite such international positions, the Tatmadaw continued to launch its most brutal

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Edroos, (2017)

assault, forcing 700,000 Rohingya to flee and killing more than 6,700 in just a month.¹⁸ Soon after the clashes broke out, more than 288 villages were partially or totally destroyed by fire in northern Rakhine state, according to satellite imagery analyzed by Human Rights Watch.¹⁹ Former State Counsellor of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi and her government continued to deny the presence of ethnic cleansing and currently, more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees are residing in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.²⁰

In discussing the Rohingya crisis, it is important to distinguish between the military and the ruling political party. After the National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Suu Kyi won the 2015 general elections, Myanmar technically became a democratic government but the disproportionate power that the military retained perpetuated continued persecution of the Rohingya population. While the military was the one perpetrating these acts of violence against the Rohingya, the ruling political party's inaction can be justified with helplessness at best. For the purpose of clarity, the paper will refer to the military as the Tatmadaw and the ruling political party as the government despite the military's de facto ruling power.

Involvement of the United States

Relationship with Myanmar

The U.S. and Myanmar have been neither avid allies nor enemies, resulting in a friendly but not particularly warm bilateral relationship. This is both the result and cause of the two states not having much conflict of interest or mutually beneficial deals. Of their minimal existing

¹⁸ Albert & Maizland, (2020)

¹⁹ *Myanmar Rohingya: What You Need to Know About the Crisis* (2020)

²⁰ Albert & Maizland, (2020)

interactions, however, democracy appears to be the common thread. While Myanmar was never a particularly important factor in U.S. involvements in Asia, the democratization of its policies and liberalization of its economy did make the U.S. an important market for Burmese apparel for a while.²¹ Prior to the ongoing human rights violations in Myanmar, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supported programs for civil society and independent media that promoted democracy and transparency. Beyond an effort to promote democracy in the region, Washington had little interest at stake.

Stance on Issue

Despite or perhaps because of the merely normal diplomatic relations between the two states, the U.S. was highly vocal in not just encouraging punishments against the Tatmadaw but as well condemning the government for its inaction and negligence. According to the State Department, as of January 30, 2023, the U.S. has sanctioned 80 individuals and 32 entities to “deprive the regime of the means to perpetuate its violence and to promote the democratic aspirations of Burma’s people.”²² While encouraging other states to follow suit, the U.S. has tightened its arms embargo and withdrawn all military aid services, imposed visa restrictions, and declared that the abuses in Myanmar constitute crimes against humanity and genocide.^{23 24 25}

Humanitarian Aid

American aid for the Rohingya crisis has largely been monetary and for two core purposes: immediate relief for refugees in neighboring states and promoting democracy. Through USAID the U.S. has provided over \$1.3 billion in assistance to Bangladesh and other host

²¹ Singh, (2006)

²² Dolven, (2023)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *U.S. Withdraws Assistance from Myanmar Military Amid Rohingya Crisis* (2017)

²⁵ *U.S. Relations With Burma* (2021)

countries to provide for the food for refugees.²⁶ An additional \$69 million in 2020 was directed to foster food security and promote peace and reconciliation, but at the same time maintain democratic space and support independent media.²⁷ Such aid directed specifically for the cause of democratic ideals was as well seen in other instances as “U.S. economic assistance focused on deepening and sustaining key political and economic reforms, ensuring that the democratic transition benefits everyday people, and mitigates division and conflict.”²⁸ For example, during Myanmar’s 2015 general elections, USAID provided \$18 million to fund Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy in their campaign efforts.²⁹

Involvement of China

Relationship with Myanmar

Since the onset of Western nations sanctioning Myanmar for human rights abuses and political instability in 1988, China and Myanmar’s relationship greatly strengthened—described as a “Pauk Phaw,” a fraternal relationship.³⁰ Beijing at this time became the largest trading partner of its neighbor whom it shares a 2129-kilometer border.³¹ China accounts for the largest share of imports and exports of Myanmar but most notably, 30-35% of the refined tin that China needs for circuit-board soldering comes from Myanmar and China’s investments form approximately 28% of Myanmar’s GDP.³² Beyond trade, China’s investments in physical infrastructure projects through the BRI’s China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). Several projects fall under the CMEC, most notably including a natural gas and oil pipeline running in

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ismail, (2018)

³⁰ Banerjee, (2023)

³¹ Ibid.

³² Samsani, (2021)

parallel which starts from Kyaukphyu City in Myanmar's Rakhine State to China's Yunan region,³³ the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone, and the Mee Ling Gyang Liquefied Natural Gas Terminal.³⁴ As seen through the Myanmar Ministry of Commerce's report that the bilateral trade between April 2022 and half of January 2023 in the financial year 2022-2023, reached up to \$2.16 billion,³⁵ the economic ties between the two states persisted throughout the Rohingya crisis despite strong international criticism.

Stance on Issue

China's stance on the Rohingya crisis has been against increasing punitive measures such as sanctions on Myanmar and as well in pursuit of non-intervention. China and its counterpart Russia have repeatedly pushed back on resolutions in the UN Security Council (UNSC) that called for sanctions and embargoes, offering both "rhetorical and material support for its handl[ing] of the so-called terrorist attacks."³⁶ Myanmar spent USD 1.3 billion in arms from the Chinese between 2010-2019 and 50% of its major arms imports in 2014-2019 were from China, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database.³⁷ Beyond its defiance of calls for sanctions on arms trade especially, China has been actively classifying the Rohingya crisis as a domestic issue that shall not be intervened with. China has objected in the UNSC to the identification of the crisis as a genocide,³⁸ and has attributed the violence to economic underdevelopment rather than ethnic cleansing.³⁹ It has offered itself to be a facilitator

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Banerjee, (2023)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts* (2021)

³⁷ Samsani, (2021)

³⁸ *UN Fails to Take Action on Order Against Myanmar on Rohingya* (2020)

³⁹ Lambert, (2022)

of the repatriation and economic development in the region in cooperation with Bangladesh and Myanmar,⁴⁰ but believes that there should be no forceful intervention.

Humanitarian Aid

Chinese assistance to the Rohingya crisis has predominantly focused on material and development aid. Materialistically, in September of 2017, China sent 150 tons of material aid, including 2000 relief tents, 3000 blankets, and hundreds of shipping containers as temporary shelters to the refugees in Bangladesh.^{41 42} China is as well providing protection and basic needs for the some 3000 Rohingya refugees who've fled into their Yunnan Province.⁴³ Beyond such, much of China's efforts focused on repatriation and development. Its efforts in organizing the repatriation of refugees had been unsuccessful as many Rohingya went into hiding in fear of returning despite China's providing of transportation and even cash inducements.⁴⁴ Beijing has as well constructed nearly 3000 houses in the Rakhine state for Rohingya returnees and pledged initial food support, but that has not led the Rohingya people to feel safe returning. Repatriation aside, China provided approximately \$5.31 million for social infrastructure, vocational training, income generation assistance and building, as well as \$150.363 million worth of scholarships for university-level and internship programs.⁴⁵

Analysis

As presented in the sections outlining the forms of humanitarian aid provided, it can already be seen that humanitarian causes were not the sole factor in consideration when the U.S.

⁴⁰ McPherson et al., (2020)

⁴¹ Ismail, (2018)

⁴² McPherson et al., (2020)

⁴³ Ismail, (2018)

⁴⁴ McPherson et al., (2020)

⁴⁵ Ismail, (2018)

and China made the decision to provide aid. Granted, more importantly, the national interests of the U.S. and China in the case of the Rohingya crisis can be seen to have a correlation to their relationship with each other.

For the U.S. which has long crowned democracy as a major source of pride and success, the promotion of democracy as an ideology is a form of maximizing influence through soft power in its “pivot to Asia.” Two factors could be used to explain why the promotion of democracy can be seen as a form of U.S. competition against China in Asia. Firstly, Myanmar and U.S.’ bilateral relations have pretty much been reliant on the sole factor of democracy building. While the two have never been inseparable allies as a result, it is at least certain to say that the state interactions revolving around democratic ideals prevented the two states from ever being enemies. Even if Myanmar isn’t a place of critical geopolitical importance to the U.S. in its strategies in Asia, it would be highly disadvantageous for the U.S. if Myanmar were to fully become an adversary that shares no common grounds. So, like how China’s economic interests are at stake given existing projects and trades, U.S.’ diplomatic interests are at stake given the sole connection between the two states rests on Myanmar’s progress towards democracy. Secondly, the U.S.’ promotion of democratic ideals can be seen to align with the Democratic Peace Theory which essentially suggests that democratic states will not go to war with one another. In the pivot to Asia, it would certainly be beneficial for the U.S. to transform as many states as possible into democracies to lessen the likelihood of conflict as it expands and as well bolsters Western influence. Thus, despite the U.S.’ seeming lack of presence in Myanmar, it is certain that it is aware of what implications Myanmar completely converting away from a democracy would have in its competition for Asia against China.

For China, on the other hand, the Belt and Road Initiative is its most important strategy in maximizing influence and asymmetrical power in Asia with a growing U.S. presence. Through these infrastructure projects, China is able to create shared value with other Asian states and simultaneously increase lesser developed countries' dependence on it. Thus, it is clear that China must do everything in its power to ensure that the BRI projects run smoothly. This could be one reason why China has been deliberately identifying the cause of the crisis to be underdevelopment—a trend that was identified in the Literature Review section—as only if underdevelopment was the cause, could China smoothly continue its developmental plans while appearing to alleviate the crisis. China similarly pushes strongly for non-interference likely because it does not want to set a precedent for other states, namely the U.S. which has been actively voicing concerns over mass incarceration and cultural genocide in China's Xinjiang region, to intervene in its own affairs. Certainly, it can not be ruled out that China may genuinely intend to help its ally, but its approach to helping them, inevitably seems to promote its own national interests as well. Thus, whether to continue its own expansion despite man-made emergencies or prevent foreign intervention in internal affairs from becoming an obstacle, China's humanitarian aid in Myanmar may well include considerations of its tensions with the U.S.

Case Study – 2011 Tōhoku earthquake

Background

On March 11th, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck Northeastern Japan and further triggered a series of catastrophes. The quake caused a devastating tsunami, and its waves led to explosions and meltdowns of the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Plant. The official total number of

people confirmed dead or missing was around 18,500.⁴⁶ More than 123,000 houses were destroyed, a million more damaged,⁴⁷ and 150,000 people were forced to evacuate their homes due to increased radiation levels in food and water as a result of the nuclear accident alone.⁴⁸ With a cost of \$220 billion incurred, the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake in Japan marked the most expensive natural disaster in history.⁴⁹

Involvement of the United States

Relationship with Japan

The U.S.' relationship with Japan reached bitter animosity but the two have become steadfast allies in the years since. On December 7th of 1941, Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor officially pulled the U.S into World War II, which it has actively resisted.⁵⁰ Hostile exchanges including the unprecedented bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki followed. In recent years, however, the U.S. and Japan began to form a much closer alliance—its shared view of China as a threat being a major factor. Whilst China and Japan both have growing ambitions in Asia, the U.S. saw Japan's demand to be treated as a “normal power,” one that could be trusted to act as other nations do, to be much less concerning than China's rapid buildup of its economic and military strength.⁵¹ With that, both Japan and the U.S. have expressed their perception of Beijing's rise in influence as a detriment to their national security.⁵² Over several issues, Japan and its Chinese neighbor had on the contrary been experiencing escalating tensions (more details to be discussed in the following section on China's involvements). On some of those issues,

⁴⁶ Rafferty & Kenneth, (2023)

⁴⁷ *On This Day: 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami* (2021)

⁴⁸ Britannica, (2023)

⁴⁹ *On This Day: 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami* (2021)

⁵⁰ Chanlett-Avery et al., (2023)

⁵¹ Chu, (2008)

⁵² Chanlett-Avery et al., (2023)

Taiwan for example, China and the U.S. share similar stances.⁵³ For those reasons, political scientists Minxin Pei and Michael D. Swaine's remark in the early 2008s that increasing disagreements between Japan and China could "divide Asia by driving a wedge between the United States and Japan on one side, and China and much of the rest of Asia on the other," appears to be accurate.⁵⁴ Moreover, Japan's heavy asymmetrical dependence on the U.S. for its defense, which also means Japan-based U.S. military capabilities, has fed into the security dilemma, worsening China's perceived security concerns and thereby exacerbating the said wedge.⁵⁵ Washington's realization that the U.S.-Japan alliance was critical in maintaining a stable U.S. presence in Asia as China rises further solidified this trend.⁵⁶ In essence, predominantly as a result of common perceptions and interests regarding China's presence in Asia, the U.S. and Japan have grown increasingly close in the last 50 years.

Stance on Issue

The U.S.' expressed position on the Tōhoku earthquake has been straightforward in that it has been showing its greatest concerns. The U.S. attempts to show this concern through its providing of humanitarian aid (to be discussed in the following sub-section), but as well through other gestures. For example, from March 11th to March 29th of 2011, President Obama had three telephone calls with Prime Minister Kan of Japan reaffirming his concerns and determination to support relief causes.⁵⁷ Additionally, then U.S. President pro tempore of the United States Senate, Daniel Inouye, visited the capital of the Miyagi prefecture, Sendai City on June 3rd, 2011.⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Chu, (2008)

⁵⁵ Akita, (2022)

⁵⁶ Green, (2007)

⁵⁷ *Readout of the President's Call with Japanese Prime Minister Kan* (2011)

⁵⁸ *Special Feature: Great East Japan Earthquake* (2012)

Humanitarian Aid

When the earthquake hit, the Japanese government sent out a request for the U.S. military stationed in the country to help in relief efforts.⁵⁹ The U.S. soon mobilized its forces and according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, U.S. rescue teams were soon seen in Kamaishi and Ofunato regions, as well as the regions specifically affected by the Fukushima nuclear accident.⁶⁰ Donations made to the American Red Cross Society for disaster relief amounted up to \$296 million.

Most notable of the American humanitarian aid efforts, however, was the special Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief Operation called Operation Tomodachi, which directly translates into Operation “Friend.” On the day after the earthquake, then Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates, authorized the U.S. Pacific Command to launch the operation and authorized \$35 million in funds.⁶¹ The operation involved numerous U.S. forces including the U.S. Air Force, Navy, USAID, U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and U.S. Department of Energy, who cooperated with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to rescue personnel and transport and deliver aid.⁶² “In the first two weeks of the operation, the U.S. Air Force flew 225 missions, transported 4.2 million tons of cargo, and approximately 2,800 people,” according to an Air Force publication.⁶³ In total, Operation Tomodachi involved more than 24,000 U.S. troops and delivered approximately 189 tons of food, 87 tons of relief materials, and 2 million gallons of potable water.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Rafferty & Kenneth, (2023)

⁶⁰ *Special Feature: Great East Japan Earthquake* (2012)

⁶¹ *Operation Tomodachi* (2019)

⁶² Basalla, Berger & Abbot, (n.d.)

⁶³ *Operation Tomodachi* (2019)

⁶⁴ Basalla, Berger & Abbot, (n.d.)

*Involvement of China**Relationship With Japan*

China and Japan's relationship today is shaped by the remaining legacies of the Sino-Japanese War and recently developed struggles in the balancing of power. Between 1931 and 1945, the Japanese carried out a series of sometimes-brutal occupation of China, including looting and killing – possibly widespread – in Nanking, the use of chemical weapons, and the alleged forced labor of more than 40,000 forced Chinese workers brought to Japanese mines and factories.⁶⁵ Although China in 1972 waived the right to war compensation in exchange for an apology and recognition of the One-China Policy, Japan has continued to provide aid amounting to \$25 billion over the last four decades.⁶⁶ Furthermore, there have been no less than 25 apologies in his counting from Japan to China but neither that nor the financial aid given has been reported by Chinese media nor advertised to the public,⁶⁷ according to Ma Licheng, a former writer for the Chinese state-owned People's Daily newspaper. Despite such underlying grievance, however, Sino-Japanese relations have been peaceful and stable up until the early 2000s. Fundamentally, Japan's goal to become a "normal power" was the trigger that accentuated the points of contention in the Sino-Japanese relationship. Specifically, Japan held the belief that some 60 years of apologizing to states like China and Korea is enough and it should be allowed out of the shadows of the war now.⁶⁸ It wanted to rid the Pacifist Constitution and with that as well became less bound to its previous identity of a perpetrator begging for forgiveness. With Japan's rise as a "normal power" in Asia, China and Japan began to face issues as related to their balancing of power specifically as China overtook Japan as the second largest world economy in

⁶⁵ *Explainer: What's Behind Strained China-Japan Relations* (2022)

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *China and Japan: Seven Decades of Bitterness* (2014)

⁶⁸ Chu, (2008)

2010.⁶⁹ The increase in Chinese military spending greatly alarmed Japan for any conflict China has with countries in the region would leave Japan in danger. In particular, any crossfire between China and Taiwan would pose a security dilemma for Japan; as a close ally of the U.S., Japan has become more involved in Chinese internal affairs in Taiwan.⁷⁰ Their geographic proximity posed many problems for their relationship in ways that Sino-American tensions have not encountered because of the imminent risk of physical danger should conflict erupt. Moreover, disputes over land and resources, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Exclusive Economic Zones, and the East China Sea continued to strain Sino-Japanese relations in recent years.⁷¹ Inevitably, worsening Sino-American relations and tighter Japanese-American relations put more pressure on Beijing and Tokyo.

Stance on Issue

Unlike the U.S.' simple one-folded reaction to the Tōhoku earthquake, the Chinese reaction appears to demonstrate mixed feelings. On one end, China showed concern and condolences to the Japanese. Then Chinese Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi, met with then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Takeaki Matsumoto at the 5th Foreign Ministers' Meeting between China, Japan, and ROK on March 19th, 2011, and conveyed deepest condolences to Japan, expressing that the Chinese people too were sad for their losses.⁷² In addition, then Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao visited affected areas and evacuation centers in Sendai and Fukushima on May 21st, 2011.⁷³ However, at the same time, China's condolences at times could be seen as "favor returning." Xinhua News, an official state news agency of China, expressed that "willingness and

⁶⁹ Akita, (2022)

⁷⁰ Chu, (2008)

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Yang Jiechi Meets with Japanese Foreign Minister...* (2011)

⁷³ *Special Feature: Great East Japan Earthquake* (2012)

readiness to help each other is just a natural reflection of the time-honored friendly bond between the two neighboring Oriental civilizations. The virtue of returning the favor after receiving one runs in the bloods of both nations.”⁷⁴ Moreover, then Chinese Premier himself states that “China is also a country prone to earthquake disasters and we fully empathize with how they feel now. We will provide more as Japan needs it.”⁷⁵ Thus, while condolences were conveyed, it appears that some aspects of them stem from China’s remembrance of its recent earthquake in Sichuan and what Japan had done at the time. Beyond such, just days before the earthquake on March 2nd, Japanese jets chased away two Chinese military planes that flew over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.⁷⁶ Conflicts over the ownership of the islands have thus been flaring up in the same time period and triggered heightened nationalist sentiments. Likely those sentiments and the remaining grievances over WWII atrocities led some of the Chinese population to make mocking remarks about those suffering in Japan.⁷⁷

Humanitarian Aid

Two days after the disaster struck, a 15-member Chinese rescue team bringing a planeload of blankets, tents, and emergency lights arrived in Japan.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce pledged \$4.5 million for disaster relief in Japan,⁷⁹ and the China Red Cross Society, a subsidiary of the Chinese Communist Party, pledged another \$152,000.⁸⁰ “[China] will provide more as Japan needs it and we want to continue to help as necessary,” Premier Wen Jiabao said.”⁸¹ Beyond such state-directed aid efforts, Chinese billionaire

⁷⁴ Bergman, (2011)

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Kent, (2011)

⁸¹ Ibid.

entrepreneur Chen Guangbiao expressed to the Xinhua News Agency that the "Japanese rescuers moved [him] very much during the [Sichuan] quake. Now that they are in trouble, we must help them too," and he distributed \$150,000 in aid.⁸²

Analysis

China and the U.S.' aid to Japan can be seen to relate to Sino-American tensions in the analysis of rhetorics used to describe aid given and the different forms of aid. Firstly, the U.S.' naming of the rescue operation Operation "Friend" highlights the use of Constructivism in wielding soft power. In doing so, the U.S. underscored not only the fact that it provided foreign assistance, but as well bolstered the narrative that it and Japan have a strong bond. Amid Sino-American competition in Asia, having reliable alliances is among the most important factors in gaining and maintaining influence in the region. Thus, the U.S.' naming of the operation can be seen as a strategic assertion of its influence and welcomed influence in the region. On the other hand, China whose relationship with Japan has been highly strained and who has no desire nor attempt to "win back" Japan to be on its side of the Asian divide, appears to simply present its aid as a "return of favor." Whether in discussing how China knows what it feels like to be in such distress or recognizing that Japan had come to their aid, China's rhetoric seems to imply that its decision to aid was based merely on a principle of reciprocity. For the sake of external legitimacy, China clearly could not remain silent, but at the same time, with Japanese-American relations tightening and Sino-Japanese relations straining, this rhetoric could be seen as China asserting that the aid in no way signals that it is softening its stance in the conflicts with Japan and the U.S. Another potential correlation in the reciprocity narrative is that China provided

⁸² Bergman, (2011)

approximately a total of \$4.6 million in aid for Japan's 2011 earthquake whereas three years back, Japan had provided approximately \$4.8 million in aid for China's earthquake in Sichuan.⁸³ The negligible differences in the two amounts could be a further piece of evidence that China is indeed only intending to return the favor. Moreso, the statement that China will provide more as Japan needs diffuses the possibility of criticisms against China for not doing enough, but at the same time implies that Japan ought to ask for help if it needs more. If Japan were to ask for help, however, the balance of power between China and Japan would be greatly altered as Japan would become dependent on China. A win-win situation could be seen for China in that it either does not need to provide anything more (than the small amount it's providing compared to the over \$300 million American aid), or it gains asymmetrical power over its Japanese adversary. If Japan were to become dependent on China, then it would inevitably have to distance itself from the U.S., giving China an advantage in the Sino-American competition as well.

Another aspect of the humanitarian aid that can be analyzed for correlations with Sino-American tensions is the difference in the type of aid provided by the Washington and Beijing. For the U.S., much of its rescue missions and aid delivery through Operation Tomodachi was carried about by military personnel operating military equipment and technologies. While some may argue that the mobilization of the military may have just been the most efficient method, then General of the Japanese Self-Defense Force Ryoichi Oriki adds in an interview with Japan Times that "the response [Operation Tomodachi] highlighted the U.S. military's capabilities in East Asia," and it "was a tremendous deterrence to China."⁸⁴ Whereas the U.S. could've, for example, directed more of its aid to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), its choice to mobilize thousands of U.S. military personnel and vehicles from both the Air Force, Navy, and

⁸³ Reuters Staff, (2008)

⁸⁴ Johnson, (2023)

Army and publicizing it could be indicative of its desire to demonstrate its military might in the Asian region despite the U.S. being geographically so far away. Given China's rapid increase in military spending and presence in the region, this could be seen as a calculated statement made by the U.S. Contrastingly, China's aid to Japan involved practically no military efforts. A reason could possibly be that the Chinese and Japanese military had several unpleasant encounters with one another over the disputed islands during the same time period. In this context, Japan might have feared malicious Chinese intentions whereas Beijing would not have wanted to risk being accused of having inappropriate intentions when an adversary is in a vulnerable state should China have considered involving its military. Rather, it sent a small rescue team on a short mission of ten days,⁸⁵ and mostly delivered funds and materials that did not require their consistent presence in the country. This "give and go" approach directly contrasts that of the U.S. which clearly appeared intent on leaving a lasting legacy to cement its entrance into Asia. Whereas China wants to return the favor and get back to protecting its interests in the conflicts it has with Japan to diffuse threats to its security and stabilize its presence in the region, the U.S. wants to make Japan a reliable, long-term ally through its aid overtures. Operation Tomodachi did in fact allow for a great advancement in Japanese-American relations as witnessed by the forming of the public-private partnership TOMODACHI by the U.S. government and the NGO U.S.-Japan Council in the aftermath to "support Japan's recovery from the... earthquake and invest in the next generation of Japanese and Americans in ways that further strengthen cultural and economic ties and deepen the friendship between the United States and Japan."⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Kent, (2011)

⁸⁶ *Assistance from the United States Following the Great East Japan Earthquake* (2012)

Concluding Findings

Although this paper's conclusion cannot be applied in general to all crises in Asia with American and Chinese involvements without further exploration of more case studies, looking at crisis response through the lens of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Myanmar and the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake in Japan supports the hypothesis that to a substantial extent, both the U.S. and China's decisions to provide humanitarian aid to crises in Asia consider the foreseen impacts they have on Sino-American tensions. Despite the nature of the two crises analyzed being drastically different, correlations between considerations of Sino-American tensions and the amount and form of aid, as well as how it was presented were observed in both case studies. Amongst many differences, a commonality shared by U.S.' involvement in Myanmar and Japan is that the U.S. wants to form relationships that pave way for its increasing presence and influence in the region that it hopes to sustain. This can be seen in the U.S.' focus on democracy in Myanmar to maintain common grounds in the bilateral relationship, and in its narrative of friendship with Japan in normal and abnormal times. On the other hand, a commonality shared by China's involvement in Myanmar and Japan is that China wants to assert and increase its asymmetrical power in order to support its expansions into Asia. This is evident in China's focus on protecting its developmental projects in Myanmar as the BRI is amongst its most important strategies for gaining influence in Asia, and in its narrative of reciprocity in Japan to maintain its firm stance on rising regional security issues. Thus, overall, whether it be the U.S.' desire to spread its Western ideals of democracy and gradually build a presence in Asia through strengthening alliances, or China's mass expansion of infrastructure projects and determination to eradicate any potential threats to internal stability and security and therefore its rise, the U.S. and China's competition after the "pivot to Asia" is evident in decisions on humanitarian aiding.

After the analysis of trends behind the decisions in humanitarian aid giving and the exploration of two case studies, the lack of significance of the UNOCHA pillars for humanitarian aid: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, is clear. Even without the consideration of correlations to the Sino-American tensions specifically, it is apparent that both the U.S. and China have their own considerations of not just what's best for the receiving state, but what too is best for themselves. When that is the case, many of these UNOCHA pillars become inconvenient for states to uphold. For example, independence is lost as soon as self-interests are considered and to achieve many of the self-interests, for example, the U.S. desire to build democratic institutions in Myanmar or Chinese desire to maintain its firm stance on existing conflicts with Japan, aid must not necessarily be directed wherever there is most need and the amount of aid must not be solely bound by need. Rather, the amount and channeling of aid must go where it best supports the donor states' interests whilst helping the receiving state. This certainly leads to the decreased effectiveness of aid as, for example, Myanmar, probably did not need extensive money for university scholarships when many people were struggling to survive mass violence. However, there is no way to enforce anything more controlled and monitored because international agreements are inherently non-binding and international organizations have little to no power over states especially over a cause like humanitarian aid that is essentially voluntary.

National interests being involved as a determining factor of humanitarian aid is overwhelmingly dominated by negative undertones. However, in observing the case studies of Myanmar and Japan, the involvement of national interests when states make decisions to and in humanitarian aid can in fact be seen as a double-edged sword. It is undeniable that the politicization of human rights as a byproduct of globalization increasing interdependency and

thus the desirability of relative power over another is an unfortunate development. Granted, as much as we would like to think that all states will act solely altruistically in a Cosmopolitan nature, it is inevitable that states prioritize the security, stability, and prosperity of their own territory and people. Given that humanitarian aid is a non-compulsive action, it is reasonable to assume that states will conduct their own cost-benefit analyses to decide whether or not and how much to aid. Consider if in a hypothetical world, there was an effective way to prevent any and all self-interests from being tied to humanitarian aid (donor states know that they cannot advance their interests in any way through this aid). If a state were to then conduct its cost-benefit analysis, it is likely that it would see considerably more costs than benefits given they are now dedicating resources that could have been used to increase national defense, develop the economy, or build a social welfare system to an external cause out of pure altruism. It is therefore reasonable to assume that many states may then decide to not give aid at all or give very little. In other words, it is a possibility that without national interests as an additional benefit, the sole incentive of doing good and global responsibility is not enough to encourage a state to give or give substantially. For example, without the U.S. interests in establishing democratic ideals in Myanmar and the Chinese interests to sustain its infrastructure projects, Myanmar would likely not have received much of the aid the U.S. and China gave for the purpose of building democracy and increasing development respectively. A comparable occurrence can be seen in the Japan case study as if it weren't for the U.S.' national interest to demonstrate military might in Asia, it likely would not have mobilized so much of its military resources that turned out to make up a great portion of the relief efforts Japan received. Similarly, if it weren't for the Chinese self-interest to not owe any favors to Japan, it could well have felt little obligation to provide aid or provided even less. Therefore, while it is true that aid

sometimes unintentionally exacerbates a crisis (like in the Rwandan Genocide), the presence of a willingness to even provide aid is critical as we can only begin to imagine how to ensure the positive effects of aid if we have any aid to begin with. This is why while the politicization of human rights is nothing to commend, bringing national interests into the cost-benefit equation may in fact do more good for the states and people in need of assistance.

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