

Lending a Helping Hand: The People's Liberation Army and Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief

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The People's Liberation Army (PLA) shows signs of viewing international Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HADR) operations as a means of improving their ability to project soft power to complement China's emerging role on the international scene. Building international goodwill, contributing to the projection of a non-threatening Chinese rise in the international community and enhancing the role of the PLA vis-à-vis other military services are three specific results that the PLA can accomplish through participation in international HADR missions. In the future, we can expect to see greater PLA involvement in international HADR missions, an emphasis on acquisition of equipment conducive to HADR and power projection, and the PLA stressing the need to develop a "logistics tail" in the form of overseas bases to sustain their operations over the long term.

Responding to help victims of a large-scale disaster outside of your own borders is a task that many countries find a worthwhile endeavor, and have shown this through their willing participation in such relief operations. Beyond their primary focus of alleviating suffering, international Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HADR) operations often showcase capabilities of the responders, highlighting strengths and revealing shortcomings. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) shows signs of viewing international Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HADR) operations as a means of improving their operational capabilities, force projection capacity, share of national defense resources, and "soft power" international prestige and influence. Strategically, there is growing recognition within the PRC of the value of HADR and Peacekeeping Operation (PKO) missions to complement their country's emerging role on the international scene. The potential soft power enhancement that engagement in such missions can provide has attraction within China, and this will lead to an increase in PLA participation and interest in HADR.

China is currently undergoing a reassessment of its international role.¹ From a careful and deliberate projection of a non-threatening, non-interventionist, "peacefully rising/developing" power, the Chinese have increasingly shown signs of becoming comfortable with more involvement on the global scene.² This international engagement represents not a sharp break from past policies, but rather an evolution of the concept used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to explain the rise in their overseas

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

engagement over the last 20 years. Recently, even Chinese rhetoric, usually a harbinger of policy change, has shown signs of this subtly shifting focus: “constructive participation” may be the new phrase the PRC uses to gain greater international acceptance of its involvement beyond its borders. At least one Chinese academic based in Beijing has offered this term as a reconceptualization of the principle of non-intervention, and some U.S. State Department personnel feel that it effectively captures the essence of China’s new approach to international policy.³

Arguably, effective “constructive participation” in the international arena requires utilization of soft power, famously defined by Joseph Nye as the “ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”⁴ The successful implementation of soft power leaves the involved countries with positive feelings toward the state that exercised it, and this can lead to a characterization of the interaction as “constructive” by all sides. And, as Joshua Cooper Ramo points out, “if China wants to...achieve a Peaceful Rise, it is crucially important that it get other nations to buy into the world-view it proposes.”⁵ This also serves the purpose of limiting the possibility for friction, or conflict, and thus further reinforcing the notion of China’s involvement as a low-threat, and beneficial, matter for all involved.

Several scholars have observed that China already wields considerable soft power appeal. Joshua Kurlantzick examines the background, rise, and likely future of Beijing’s soft power campaign in his 2007 work, *Charm Offensive*.⁶ Phillip Saunders notes that China has “carved out a new identity as a successful ‘authoritarian development state’” and that this model holds “considerable appeal” for authoritarian leaders in developing countries.⁷ This desire of developing countries to emulate the Chinese, perhaps as a counter to models offered by the West, is a manifestation of the tenants of soft power which highlight attraction rather than coercion. Saunders also observes that the Chinese government has devoted “significant resources to promoting Chinese culture and language” and ties this directly to attempts to increase soft power.⁸ In fact, Joseph Nye himself penned an op-ed in late 2005, titled, “The Rise of China’s Soft Power” in which he cited Beijing’s increasing engagement in diplomacy (both regionally and farther reaching) as a trend worthy of U.S. attention.

Interestingly, some scholars have noted that the PRC’s emphasis on soft power also affects the Chinese viewpoint with regard to international relations. Zhang Baohui, an Assistant Professor at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, postulates that the Chinese believe that the decline of the United States as a global power is due to an American loss of soft power.⁹ Beginning in around 2006, Dr. Zhang notes that the Chinese international relations community perception of power began to expand, placing importance on elements beyond military and economic capabilities. This new appreciation for the uses of soft power coincided with the image difficulties that the United States experienced on the international stage, which reinforced the Chinese analyst’s perceptions regarding the importance of such goodwill.¹⁰

Clearly, then, an opportunity then exists for the Chinese to perhaps take advantage of this shift by redoubling their own efforts to increase their global influence, albeit in subtle, non-threatening ways.

If we accept that enhancing soft power holds appeal to China as a desirable goal¹¹, then what role is there for a traditionally “hard power” component such as the PLA? There are indications that the PLA increasingly views involvement in international HADR missions as an effective means of accomplishing three specific results:

1. Building international goodwill (and as a corollary, also producing the domestic benefit of enhancing the sense of Chinese national pride)
2. Contributing to the projection of a non-threatening rise and simultaneously reinforcing that the PRC is acting as a “responsible stakeholder” in the international community¹²
3. Enhancing the role of the PLA vis-à-vis other military services (institutional benefit)

These goals are listed in rank order, starting with one that has the greatest impact on soft power, and ending with one that is purely an institutional benefit, albeit an interesting one to explore.

History suggests that the CCP has a keen appreciation of the potential goodwill benefits for such “soft” uses of military power: within China’s borders, the PLA has performed actions that are consistent with this approach. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong during the early decades of the movement to the struggle for control of the government in the 1940s, the ideology and rhetoric of both the CCP and PLA has consistently emphasized the importance of winning popular support through placing the welfare of the people as a central tenant of their revolution. Practically, for the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army (the precursor to the PLA), this equated to following the Three Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points for Attention – rules that included “Don’t take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses” and “Don’t hit or swear at people.”¹³ These decrees, issued by Mao Zedong in 1928 (with some revisions in 1929) emphasized the restraint that the military should exercise with respect to interactions with the civilian population – a critical policy to follow, especially as the Army attempted to win the support of the people, which Mao viewed as central to the success of his revolution.¹⁴ This focus on the sentiments and support of the people, even when employing military force while fighting a revolution, sets the historical framework under which the PLA eventually developed. Of course, there are counter-examples in PRC history, when the PLA has turned on the people (such as Tiananmen 1989, Tibet in March 2008, etc.), but the fact that the military holds this reverence for peasant life and property as one of its founding myths is a powerful representation of the link it believes it has with its citizens.

President Hu Jintao’s recent emphasis on the traditional Mao standard of *junmin jiehe*, or “the synthesis of the army and the people” seems to only further deepen this tie.¹⁵ For its part, the PLA has also recently exhibited this dedication to the welfare and well-being of the people through involvement in

domestic disaster relief. As the text of China's most recent public document discussing defense (the White Paper on *China's National Defense in 2008*) notes:

Whenever a natural disaster occurs, the armed forces are always in the forefront of efforts to protect the people's lives and save the state and people's property. Over the past two decades they have participated in emergency rescues and disaster reliefs on more than 100,000 occasions. They have mobilized more than 23 million men, and organized more than one million vehicle trips, and some 15,000 plane and ship journeys to save more than 10 million people and transport more than 200 million tons of materials out of perilous conditions.¹⁶

Indeed, the variety of domestic HADR missions with PLA participation is striking: in the past two years, the PLA has participated in over 130 disaster relief operations in cases of floods, earthquakes, snowstorms, typhoons and fires, leading to their rescue or evacuation of a total of 10 million people.¹⁷ Perhaps the largest operation that involved the PLA was the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province, measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale. As the 2008 Defense White Paper reports:

In response, the PLA and the PAPF deployed 146,000 troops, mobilized 75,000 militiamen and reservists, flew over 4,700 sorties (including the use of helicopters) and employed 533,000 vehicles/time in the relief effort. They rescued 3,338 survivors, evacuated 1.4 million local residents, and transported, airlifted and air-dropped 1.574 million tons of relief materials. They sent 210 teams of medical workers, psychotherapists, and sanitation and epidemic prevention specialists, and treated 1.367 million injured people. The troops strictly observed discipline, and kept detailed records of hundreds of millions of yuan in cash and large quantities of valuables recovered from the debris, all of which was handed over to the owners or relevant departments of local governments.¹⁸

Of particular note is the last sentence, which clearly highlights the accountability and responsibility of the military forces. The implication is clear: PLA (and PAPF) will not take advantage of the crisis situation for personal gain, but rather will dedicate their efforts solely towards alleviating the people's suffering through ensuring that they regain their lost valuables.

The Chinese press has touted all PLA involvement in domestic disaster relief, consistently highlighting the benefits that the PLA provides to those affected by the disaster and thus further cementing the linkages between PLA HADR activities and the creation of positive perceptions among the supported population.¹⁹ In addition, the Chinese people themselves appear to have a very positive view of the PLA's involvement in these disaster relief operations. Jing Huang, a visiting senior research fellow at the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore, noted that the "crucial role played by ... the PLA soldiers have won them people's support and admiration."²⁰

Analyst James Mulvenon agrees, noting that "In terms of domestic perceptions, the PLA's massive response to the earthquake reinforced its popularity among the Chinese people, building upon the positive imagery of the PLA's efforts during the 1998 flood fighting and the 2007 ice and snow storm."²¹ The significance of this link at the domestic level lies in the appreciation that the population has for such

uses of military forces. After experiencing the benefits first-hand, it is logical to surmise that Chinese citizens would expect similar positive perception benefits to accrue to the PLA from other, foreign populations that receive such support. The idea of “building goodwill” has a unique aspect here for the Chinese, in that the notion of these positive emotions toward the PLA’s involvement in HADR is now one that has the potential to move beyond Chinese citizens and extend into the international community writ large.

Indeed, the Chinese have first-hand experience with accruing such benefits as a result of their increasing participation in UN peacekeeping missions. As Dai Shao'an, vice-director of the Peacekeeping Affairs Office of the Ministry of Defense has stated:

Knowing that they [Chinese peacekeepers] are helping to secure peace and a normal life, our soldiers take their peacekeeping duties very seriously. And wherever they go or whatever they do, they always bear in mind that they are messengers of peace, representing China. This sense of responsibility and dignity naturally lead to good deeds.²²

Dai has also visited PRC peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, and notes that “When local people in Africa see me in uniform, some of them began to shout 'China, China' and gave me the thumbs up. Some children even salute me the way Chinese soldiers do.”²³ Clearly, the PLA’s involvement in PKO appears to be producing exactly the anticipated soft power result for the Chinese.

Building International Goodwill through HADR

From the PLA perspective, the gains to China from their involvement in HADR missions are great. First and foremost is the ability to attract others to the Chinese world perspective through positive interactions. Since 2002, China has contributed in some capacity to HADR operations in 14 countries.²⁴ The tipping point for the Chinese may have occurred during the December 26, 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which devastated coastal areas across South and Southeast Asia. This event clearly highlighted deficiencies in China’s ability to respond to natural disasters, even those which occurred nearby. Beijing took notice, and in the wake of the tsunami, the need to improve China's HADR support capacity was identified in the country's 2006 Defense White Paper.²⁵ In addition, a PLA delegate to the Chinese National People’s Congress (NPC) suggested the drafting of a law regulating military operations overseas, with the clear implication that since such operations were likely to occur in the future, pre-emptive regulation was needed now.²⁶ This paves the path, at least legislatively, for clearer regulations surrounding the future employment of the PLA abroad – and also implies that such missions are on the minds of Chinese government officials.

The fact that many of these natural disasters have occurred nearby in Asia – the PRC’s “backyard” – has also made an impression upon the Chinese. If China is to develop into a global power,

Beijing ought to have the capability to be the “first-responder” to disasters occurring nearby. As Drew Thompson of the Nixon Center recently noted:

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has carefully observed the international response to recent disasters, their positive effect on public opinion and the resulting evolution of military thought. Well versed in responding to domestic disasters, such as annual floods and the recent earthquake in Sichuan Province, the PLA is carefully and cautiously assessing the future potential for international disaster relief and humanitarian assistance missions.²⁷

Involvement in disasters in South/Southeast Asia would be a logical first step to expanding this domestic capacity abroad.

Evidence increasingly points to signs that the PLA is seriously considering the benefits of involvement in this arena, and recent equipment acquisitions within the Chinese military – particularly the commissioning of a hospital ship²⁸ – also seem to indicate that this is a role China will develop in the future. Indeed, the PLA seems inclined to adapt the HADR mission as a central tenant of their operations, perhaps to help establish their future relevancy as a service. As a U.S. military observer comments, “There are officers who flatly declare that the future for the PLA ground force is to focus on MOOTW. There is an important undercurrent of opinion among military academics that ‘non-traditional security challenges’ will occupy the attention of the PLA for the coming decade or so.”²⁹ Ouyang Wei, a researcher with the PLA’s National Defense University, agrees, noting, “With China’s interests and international status increasing, the country will shoulder more responsibility to maintain world and regional peace and stability.”³⁰

Yet such PLA activity in the international arena comes with perils as well. For example, any incident of PLA mistreatment of the local population would clearly undermine the intended development of positive feelings and goodwill. Hence, the CCP has exerted tight controls on military members operating abroad. For example, interviews conducted by the International Crisis Group related to Chinese participation in peacekeeping operations revealed the “propensity of Chinese troops to segregate themselves” from all others, including fellow peacekeepers.³¹ Of course, this means that the Chinese troops are also not well integrated with the local population, which on the positive side, has kept them free of any scandals involving UN peacekeeping operations.³² The aforementioned legislative push to regulate PLA involvement in overseas operations will also serve as a mechanism to promote control and limit the potential for shameful incidents involving the PLA. This risk-adverse approach to operations abroad may reduce the effectiveness of their international engagement and attempts at building goodwill, but it certainly lessens the chances of severe backlash against the Chinese presence.

Another issue that China may have to contend with is the potential end of the “honeymoon period” with regard to host-nation appreciation of its international involvement. This relates primarily to non-HADR Chinese actions, most notably in Africa. As a U.S. State Department official notes, the PRC

enjoys a lot of goodwill from developing countries, but there are signs that this positive sentiment is already starting to wear, due to the lopsided nature of the economic relationship.³³ For example, average, non-elite Africans increasingly see Chinese involvement in a negative light, citing evidence of corruption, exploitation, and support of repressive regimes.³⁴

Other potential downsides to future international HADR missions, as outlined by Drew Thompson, include possible PLA concerns that such operations could detract from core warfighting missions (such as Taiwan scenarios) or divert military resources, possibly placing response to a domestic disaster at risk.³⁵ Revealing weaknesses through poor performance and possible embarrassment at the scale of a Chinese disaster response, particularly given the contributions of wealthy states such as the US or Japan, are other potential concerns that Thompson cites. These are all plausible rationales for a cautious Chinese response to HADR missions, and are no doubt giving the CCP pause regarding the way forward in this arena.

Yet compelling evidence also exists to indicate that this HADR mission is firmly embraced by both the CCP and the PLA. For example, China's Constitution and Law on National Defense both regard emergency handling and disaster relief work as part of the army's duties, further institutionalizing this mission set within the PLA.³⁶ The PLA serves the Party, and the CCP appears to hold the HADR mission in high regard. As further evidence of this codification, in June 2005, the State Council and the CMC published the *Regulations on the Participation of the People's Liberation Army in Emergency Rescue and Disaster Relief*.³⁷ Admittedly, this is a document focused on the participation of the PLA in domestic missions, but it does contribute to the institutional acceptance of the mission set. Finally and perhaps most compellingly, President Hu Jintao's articulation of the "historic missions" for the military, first presented in a speech to the Central Military Commission on December 24, 2004, places emphasis on developing a force capable of conducting overseas non-traditional military tasks such as HADR.³⁸ Specifically, the task of safeguarding world peace and promoting mutual development gives the PLA the mandate to develop operational capabilities conducive to these activities, and their international HADR involvement is a direct outgrowth of this.

From an internal Army perspective, in recent years, flood control and relief operations have taken on particular prominence in PLA organizational culture. According to a U.S. Army official, PLA officers and soldiers view participation in domestic HADR missions as a means of earning respect, credibility, and more concretely, recognition and promotions.³⁹ This is akin to participation in combat for some other militaries: it is a mark of being tested in the tasks that a soldier trains for, and as such, is deserving of recognition.

Of course, the PLA's institutional preferences are only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to international HADR engagement. The Army cannot act unilaterally, and so their ability to shape the

situation becomes evident only in their response to requests that come down through the bureaucracy.⁴⁰ Inter-agency relationships and political considerations play as much of a role as do PLA desires in shaping the future of China's involvement in international HADR.

Non-Threatening and Peaceful Development: A Responsible Stakeholder

The second potential gain from PLA involvement in overseas HADR is the validation of China's non-threatening rise and peaceful development. The circumstances surrounding HADR missions seem tailor made for such international reassurances: How could China pose a threat if she is merely responding to another nation's call and plea for assistance? Beijing has always only taken action upon receiving formal requests for involvement, be it in HADR operations or PKO missions, and this history allows the Chinese to build a solid and logical base for deflecting any potential cries of imperialistic behavior. After all, Beijing supports non-interference and respects state sovereignty, and thus reacts only to explicit invitations for involvement – which, as China is not shy to point out, is not necessarily the case with recent U.S. foreign policy actions.

And furthermore, this involvement can also serve as evidence that China is indeed a “responsible stakeholder” in the international arena, intent on the “peaceful development” that President Hu Jintao often discusses.⁴¹ Perhaps even more compelling for the CCP, it would be difficult for the international community (and for the United State in particular) to refute this use of the PLA in the international arena after repeatedly calling upon China to become more involved, and even coining the term “responsible stakeholder.”

Yet this use of soft power certainly also has its limitations. As Naval War College professors James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara write, “Perhaps soft power eases qualms about a nation's actions—a useful thing in itself from China's standpoint—but cannot summon forth positive action.”⁴² Still, as an emerging power, Beijing may be satisfied with a neutral perception of China's developing role, rather than a negative one.

Service Rivalries and the Relevancy of the PLA

Finally, institutional rivalries may also make the PLA inclined to view HADR as a mission that emphasizes their relevance to the future of the PRC. Some observers cite the nascent emergence of inter-service competition over missions (and purpose) as fueling this development.⁴³ The PLAN has perhaps the clearest mandate among Chinese armed forces: it has always played a prominent role in preparation for any military action involving Taiwan, and whispers of a potential aircraft carrier under development have also enhanced the relevance of the Navy as a service. Activities in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as well as the recent unveiling of the PRC's first hospital ship, have further solidified the transformational nature of the PLAN, as well as its importance to Chinese soft power projection.⁴⁴

For its part, the PLAAF has recently undergone a doctrinal shift, moving from a largely defensive force to a more advanced one, with enhanced doctrine and capabilities.⁴⁵ This has led to an emphasis on precision-guided munitions, as well as support aircraft with power projection capabilities – which also have soft power uses.

These developments leave ground forces as the service most in search of a new, transformational rationale. And the HADR mission may provide just this, enhancing the role of the PLA in relation to its sister services. There is evidence that PLA leaders recognize this, and will utilize it to develop Army capabilities. For example, during a 2008 visit to the U.S. Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (DMHA) in Hawaii, a U.S. briefer mentioned that the center was almost closed down five years ago. In response, a senior ranking military officer from China's National Defense University had a question: with the conduct of warfare changing and the emphasis now on technology and long range PGMs, the role of the Navy and Air Force, relative to the other services, has increased dramatically. HADR is the contribution that the Army brings to the table given the changing way of war. With that in mind, why was this center almost closed down? Did your senior Army leadership fail to see these trends and fail to see the significance of the connection to HADR?⁴⁶

U.S. military personnel have gleaned other information that indicates that many in the Chinese Army view HADR as the Army's "growth industry."⁴⁷ In this role, it serves the important purpose of highlighting the relevance of the service to China's future actions on the international stage. And as Dr. Maorong Jiang postulates, HADR missions may also provide an "outlet" for the PLA – a means of allowing it to constructively direct its energies and achieve a sense of purpose beyond any internal missions that the CCP requires of it.⁴⁸

There are also some signs that the PLA wishes to downplay the contributions made by other services. For example, the April 2009 international fleet review that occurred in waters off Qingdao did not receive television coverage on China Central Television (CCTV). Chinese netizens noticed this, and raised questions about why there were no images of this event, which celebrated the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PLAN. Speculation ensued that the ground forces managed to deliberately downplay coverage of the event, due to institutional jealousy.⁴⁹ If such a rivalry did in fact play a role, it provides some rare public evidence of inter-service tensions over roles and missions – tensions that may be moving to the surface.

Testing the Waters: Evidence of Changes in the HADR Arena

Due to these perceived benefits as well as the mandate provided by the new historic missions, we can expect that the armed forces of China will increasingly exhibit a willingness to step outside of their traditional boundaries. Some evidence exists that this is already occurring: from participation in the Gulf

of Aden anti-piracy mission, to an increase in PKO and HADR missions, China appears poised to expand her military missions abroad.

First, China's participation in the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission is indeed historic, as it marks the most distant sustained deployment of PLAN naval forces. Beginning in December 2008, the PLAN has provided three ships to deter pirates targeting merchant ships on major trade routes that pass through the Gulf of Aden. As of July 2009, the naval ships participating have switched out three times, providing a total of nine ships and their crews with this experience.⁵⁰ Chinese military officers have already publically admitted the operational benefits and capabilities that they gain from this mission: China Daily quotes Fleet commander Rear Admiral Du Jingchen as admitting "he had more on his mind than battling hijackers during his four-month tour off the coast of Somalia."⁵¹ The newspaper goes on to note that the experience provided the "highly experienced officer" with a "rare opportunity to test the Chinese facilities, weapons, and support functions to the full, as well as open the door for military-based diplomacy on the open sea."⁵² This use of the PLAN also helps to fulfill the new historic missions outlined by Hu Jintao; namely, that of "safeguarding national interests."⁵³

Members of the PLAN also appear acutely aware of the benefits to participating in the Gulf of Aden mission. According to Dr. Maorong Jiang, PLAN sailors are paying for the privilege of being allowed to participate in this operation.⁵⁴ This also reinforces an earlier point, regarding the high value placed on such missions by members of the Chinese military. Clearly, participation is seen as career-enhancing and such positions are highly sought by sailors for the experience and skills they offer.

Next, as a recent International Crisis Group report details, the recent increase in the numbers of PRC participants in PKO missions is quite striking.⁵⁵ As of 2008, the PRC deploys approximately 2,146 troops to eleven UN missions – a tenfold increase from its contribution just five years before.⁵⁶ The other significant component of China's PKO involvement is in the nature of her contributions; specifically, the increased deployment of military personnel. This is evidence of a growing PRC acceptance of and comfort with the role of PLA members in international situations.

Finally, recent years have also seen an uptick in PRC involvement in international HADR operations. Thus far, the contributions have been primarily monetary, with some deployment of medical assets and People's Armed Police (PAP), who responded to the 2004 tsunami and earthquakes in Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan and Algeria.⁵⁷ However, a recent People's Daily article touted the contributions of the PLA to HADR, noting that "[PLA] personnel have participated in joint international rescue operations in 16 major natural calamities, including the Indian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina in southern U.S. and the South Asia earthquake."⁵⁸ Recently revealed administrative adjustments within the PLA also serve to institutionalize this new emphasis on HADR through the development of "more than ten specialized troop units and detachments responsible for rescue and relief work."⁵⁹ The fact that such organizations exist on

a permanent basis within the PLA is evidence that China anticipates regularly using the functions that they embody, signifying a formalization of the HADR role within the organization.

China's response to a recent U.S. initiative to conduct joint HADR exercises with the PLA will prove interesting. U.S. Army Chief of Staff General George Casey announced on August 24, 2009 that the two countries militaries are moving forward with a bilateral HADR exercise.⁶⁰ The evidence presented here suggests that within the PLA, there will be a strong institutional preference to join such exercises, to further hone capabilities and ensure continued ground force relevance in this arena. The benefits appear great: such an exercise offers the PLA the opportunity to interact with foreign militaries highly adept at HADR and force projection, and to glean lessons that may have applicability to China's military modernization efforts.

However, potential pitfalls also exist. The PLA has traditionally been leery of transparency, and may not want to risk potential embarrassment should it become evident that their capabilities are not on par with the Americans. Also, as the ICG noted in its recent PKO report, the PLA is not a monolithic organization, and there are some factions that see peacekeeping (and presumably, other overseas "soft power" military operations) as ideologically unsound, violating the "non-intervention" principle, or simply of a low priority.⁶¹ And as with any bureaucracy, inter-agency coordination and competition will play a role that could potentially limit the ability of the PLA to accept the invitation offered.

Future Trends

Based on this background, several developing PRC HADR and PKO trends are emerging:

- Sustained (or perhaps increased) participation in PKOs and international HADR missions
- Acquisition of equipment conducive to HADR and power projection
- Long term need to develop a "logistics tail" in the form of overseas bases to sustain their operations

In the future, countries that invite international assistance after a natural disaster should expect a positive response from the PRC. This is particularly true for any event occurring in Southeast Asia, because its proximity to China offers an attractive venue for exercising developing HADR capabilities. But countries further away can also expect offers of assistance from Beijing in response to a HADR request: as the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy operation shows, China is increasingly willing to utilize (and thus develop) its emerging projection capabilities.

Second, the PLA has recognized the value of HADR equipment, particularly items which offer a strategic airlift capability. Along those lines, we can expect the PLA to invest in a large indigenous strategic aircraft program development, one with the potential for both military and civilian usage.⁶² The ambiguity in exactly how they will employ these assets serves to Beijing's benefit, as both hard and soft power uses are possible. The airframes lend themselves to multiple uses, so the program would retain a

patina of civil sector employment. This, of course, contributes to China's peaceful development strategy: these aircraft could serve merely as transportation assets.

In addition, the PRC will most likely increase their procurement and/or production of rotary wing aircraft, to allow rapid insertion into areas ravaged by natural disasters. This builds on a key lesson learned from the Szechuan earthquake response, where the PLA discovered it sorely lacked this capability.⁶³ The importance of transport helicopters in HADR hinges on their ability to not only deliver rescue parties to the stricken area, but also do deliver food supplies and perform medical evacuation, if needed.⁶⁴ Indeed, observers noted that the earthquake response effort suffered from a lack of heavy lift, which exacerbated the problems created by massing troops and led to needless deaths due to a lack of a sufficient aerial evacuation capability.⁶⁵ And rotary wing aircraft, like their fixed-wing counterparts, have multiple uses across a broad spectrum of operations, making them an attractive asset for any emerging power.

Finally, on the long-term horizon, all of this international involvement logically points to the need for an extended logistical capability. Within the next ten years, China will likely have to face the issue of how to effectively support her growing global interests. Her energy needs are voracious, and this consideration alone will lead Beijing to become sensitive to any perceived vulnerabilities in overseas interests. An aircraft carrier, already widely rumored to be in development,⁶⁶ will be a first step towards both the global extension of logistical capabilities and the ability to protect and defend China's interests abroad. Carriers do not sail alone, so presumably development of the ships that constitute the accompanying group also looms on the horizon. And beyond the potential capabilities presented by an aircraft carrier, China needs to seriously consider other means of extending the reach of her logistical support network. The next step is not jumping to overseas military basing negotiations⁶⁷, but rather to instead cultivate capabilities through involvement in HADR operations that pose little threat to the prevailing "peaceful development" strategy. Establishing logistical support for a HADR operation provides the PLA with many valuable skills, yet offers no clear threat to the international community – and may even garner favorable perceptions as a result.

China is at a crossroad, seeming poised to undertake a larger role in international endeavors. The route taken by the PLA vis-à-vis HADR operations could serve to enhance her soft power projection capabilities, and potentially smooth the path for the preferred "peaceful rise." The mission is also appealing to the PLA, and thus we can expect to see them engage in more activity in this HADR arena in the future.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, Zheng Bijian, “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great Power Status” *Foreign Affairs*, v. 84 no. 5 (September/October 2005) :18-24. Concern over the use of the word “rise” and the images that it may invoke of China as a threat led to the transformation of the phrase into “Peaceful Development”. See “China’s Peaceful Development Road,” White Paper, Information Office of the State Council, 22 December 2005, available at: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200512/22/eng20051222_230059.html. See also Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Andrew Small, “China’s New Dictatorship Diplomacy - Is Beijing Parting with Pariahs?” *Foreign Affairs*, Volume: 87, Issue: 1 January/February 2008: 38-56 and Evan S. Medeiros, “Is Beijing Ready for Global Leadership?” *Current History* vol. 108, Issue 179: 250-256.

² See China’s National Defense in 2008 (White Paper) available at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2009-01/20/content_17155577.htm for a discussion of the capabilities that the Chinese armed forces plan to develop. Among these are power projection capabilities, which will allow China greater reach on the global stage.

³ Phrase used by an academic from the Peking University School of International Studies. State Department sentiments expressed during interviews with the author, 1 May 2009, Beijing.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs, 2005), x.

⁵ Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), 28. Available at <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/244.pdf>.

⁶ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London: 2007).

⁷ Phillip C. Saunders, *China’s Global Activism: Strategy, Drivers, and Tools*, Institute for National Strategic Studies Occasional Paper 4 (National Defense University Press, Washington, D.C., October 2006): 17. Saunders cites Joshua Kurlantzick, “Cultural Revolution: How China Is Changing Global Diplomacy,” *New Republic*, June 27, 2005, 16–21.

⁸ Saunders, 17. For example, he notes that foreign student enrollment in Chinese universities has increased from 85,000 in 2002 to 110,000 in 2004. Presumably, then, a Chinese education holds attraction for students around the world.

⁹ Dr. Zhang Baohui, interview with author, 2 June 2009, Hong Kong.

¹⁰ Thanks to Dr. Zhang Baohui for providing this connection.

¹¹ See Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*.

¹² Phrased coined by Robert B. Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State, during remarks to the National Committee on the United States and China Relations, presented in New York City, September 21, 2005, http://www.disam.dsca.mil/pubs/INDEXES/Vol%2028_2/Zoellick.pdf

¹³ *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, (Foreign Languages Press: Peking 1969 First Edition 1961 Second Printing 1967 Third Printing 1969): 155-56, <http://www.marx2mao.com/Mao/TMR47.html#en1>. The Three Main Rules of Discipline, articulated by Mao in 1928-1929, are: (1) Obey orders in all your actions. (2) Don't take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses. (3) Turn in everything captured. The Eight Points for Attention are: (1) Speak politely. (2) Pay fairly for what you buy. (3) Return everything you borrow. (4) Pay for anything you damage. (5) Don't hit or swear at people. (6) Don't damage crops. (7) Don't take liberties with women. (8) Don't ill-treat captives.

¹⁴ This was a concept that Mao developed during the Jiangxi Soviet Period (1931-1934) as he worked out the principles that he would later call “People’s War.” See June Teufel Dreyer, *China’s Political System: Modernization and Tradition*, 7th ed., (New York: Longman, 2010), 70-71.

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- ¹⁵ See Willy Lam, “Hu Boosts Military Modernization at PLA Anniversary” *China Brief* Volume 9, Issue 16. August 5, 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=willy&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35369&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=e7a69cc668 (accessed 12 September 2009).
- ¹⁶ China’s National Defense in 2008, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (Beijing: March 11, 2009), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/5/5.3.htm> (accessed 3 August 2009).
- ¹⁷ Ibid., section on “The Armed Forces and the People,” http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-01/21/content_17162816.htm (accessed 3 August 2009).
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ See, for example, China Daily special coverage of the Wenchuan Earthquake, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/china_quake08_page.html
- ²⁰ Jing Huang, “Citizenship Arising from the Earthquake,” *China Daily*, May 28, 2008: 8.
- ²¹ James Mulvenon, “The Chinese Military’s Earthquake Response Leadership Team” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 25, p6.
- ²² Quoted in Su Qiang and Le Tian, “Peacekeeping – A Rising Role for China’s PLA” *China Daily*, July 24, 2007. Available online at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-07/24/content_5442172.htm
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ian Storey, “Hospital Ships Can Be China’s ‘Diplomats’” *The Straits Times*, April 8, 2009. <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/viewpoint/is8apr09.pdf>
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ “China: The Responsible Stakeholder’s Overseas Operations” Stratfor Global Intelligence (March 12, 2007) http://www.stratfor.com/china_responsible_stakeholders_overseas_operations (accessed 3 August 2009).
- ²⁷ Drew Thompson, “International Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance: A Future Role for the PLA?” *China Brief*, Vol. 8 Issue 11 (June 6, 2008) Available online at: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4941&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=168&no_cache=1
- ²⁸ Storey, “Hospital Ships Can Be China’s ‘Diplomats’”.
- ²⁹ U.S. military official, interview with author, 27 May 2009, Beijing.
- ³⁰ “Peace Mission-2009 Improves Anti-Terror Response: Chinese Military Officer” PRC Press Release (July 25, 2009) <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cetur/eng/xwdt/t576511.htm>
- ³¹ *China’s Growing Role in UN Peacekeeping*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report N.166 (17 April 2009): 7.
- ³² Ibid. Recent sexual abuse and human traffic scandals involving UN PKO missions include Bosnia and Herzegovina, the DRC, Cote d’Ivoire, and Cambodia.
- ³³ U.S. State Department official, interview with author, 1 June 2009, Beijing.
- ³⁴ See the discussion at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service sponsored conference, “Africa and China: Issues and Insights” November 7, 2008. Conference report available at: <http://asianstudies.georgetown.edu/publications/conference/africachina/61673.html>
- ³⁵ Drew Thompson, “International Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance: A Future Role for the PLA?” *China Brief*, Vol. 8 Iss. 11 6 June 2008.
- ³⁶ See White Paper on China’s National Defense in 2008, Chapter X: The Armed Forces and the People, available at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-01/21/content_17162816.htm. The White Paper provides the observation that, “As stipulated by the Constitution and laws, it is an important task for the armed forces to take part in national development and disaster relief.”

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- ³⁷ [Ibid.](#)
- ³⁸ James Mulvenon, “Chairman Hu and the PLA’s “New Historic Missions””, *Chinese Leadership Monitor*, No 27, 2008. See also Dan Hartnett, “China’s Military and Security Activities Abroad”, Testimony before the U.S.- China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C. March 4, 2009.
- ³⁹ U.S. military official, interview with author, 27 May 2009, Beijing.
- ⁴⁰ Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt (North East Asia Project Director / China Adviser International Crisis Group), interview with author, 1 June 2009, Beijing.
- ⁴¹ “Chinese Scholar Explicates China’s Peaceful Development” *People’s Daily Online*, December 29, 2005, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200512/29/eng20051229_231465.html
- ⁴² James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “Is China a ‘Soft’ Naval Power?” *China Brief*, Vol 9 Issue 17, 20 August 2009, Available online at: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35432&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=414&no_cache=1
- ⁴³ U.S. military officials, interview with author, 27 May 2009, Beijing.
- ⁴⁴ See, for example, Holmes and Yoshihara, “Is China a ‘Soft’ Naval Power?”
- ⁴⁵ SinoDefence.com <http://www.sinodefence.com/airforce/default.asp>
- ⁴⁶ U.S. military official, correspondence with author, 3 September 2009.
- ⁴⁷ [Ibid.](#)
- ⁴⁸ Dr. Maorong Jiang, interview with author, 3 September 2009, USMA.
- ⁴⁹ U.S. State Department official, interview with author, 1 June 2009, Beijing.
- ⁵⁰ Wang Hui, “PLA Navy expands its horizons in Somalia mission” *China Daily* (April 29, 2009), http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-04/29/content_7729091.htm
- ⁵¹ [Ibid.](#)
- ⁵² [Ibid.](#)
- ⁵³ Huang Kunlun, “Watching PLA Fulfill Its New Mission from the Gulf of Aden—PLA’s Mission Will Extend to Wherever National Interests Expand,” *PLA Daily*, January 4, 2009.
- ⁵⁴ Dr. Maorong Jiang, interview with author, 3 September 2009.
- ⁵⁵ See *China’s Growing Role in UN Peacekeeping*.
- ⁵⁶ [Ibid.](#), Appendix B.
- ⁵⁷ Wang Hua-lin, “Beijing MR Engineering Regiment: 150 personal and 12 search dogs send to quake zone” *PLA Daily Online Edition* http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/2008a/2008-05/27/content_1282152.htm (accessed 25 September 2009).
- ⁵⁸ Wen Xian and Liu Gang, “China Actively Conducts External Military Exchanges” *People’s Daily Online* (March 11, 2009) <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90786/6611315.html> (accessed September 20, 2009).
- ⁵⁹ Reportedly, this change originated after the flood-relief operations of 1998. See Liu Fengan “PLA disaster-reduction and peacekeeping force systems formed” *PLA Daily*, September 16, 2009. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2009-09/16/content_4088516.htm (accessed September 20, 2009).
- ⁶⁰ Charlie Reed, “Casey: U.S., China to Begin Joint Humanitarian Relief Training”, *Stars and Stripes*, Pacific Edition, 26 August 2009. <http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?article=64377§ion=104>
- ⁶¹ *China’s Growing Role in UN Peacekeeping*, 27.
- ⁶² Dr. Zhang Baohui, Lingnan University, interview with author, 2 June 2009, Hong Kong.

⁶³ U.S. military official, interview with author, 27 May 2009, Beijing.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of the various types of helicopters used in HADR operations, see Suresh Abraham, “Tactical Transport Helicopters in Humanitarian Relief Operations”, *Asian Defense Journal* (April 2009): 16-18. In the Sichuan earthquake, China used primarily S-70s, a variant of the UH-60 Blackhawk.

⁶⁵ U.S. briefing, shared with author on 8 August 2009.

⁶⁶ U.S. State Department official, interview with author, 1 June 2009, Beijing.

⁶⁷ Although recently, some analysts have suggested that Beijing may need to “reconsider its traditional aversion to establishing overseas military facilities.” See Michael S. Chase and Andrew S. Erickson, “Changes in Beijing’s Approach to Overseas Basing?”, *China Brief* Vol 9 Iss: 19 (September 24, 2009), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35536&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=1e7c04ad8f (accessed September 25, 2009).