

# China Throws Away a Chance to Lead

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Alleviating the human suffering left in Typhoon Haiyan's wake is now rightly front of mind for much of the world. But a geopolitical effect is becoming clear too. The stark contrast between key countries' humanitarian responses could have a lasting impact on the balance of influence in Asia.

Of course, the core issue should not be politics but the survival and rebuilding of storm-wracked communities. It may seem heartless to speculate about the geopolitics of a disaster that has taken thousands of lives. But there is always an edge of strategic diplomacy to nations' efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance.

That was the case in 2004, when a core group of the United States, Japan, India and Australia quickly mobilized to help victims of the cataclysmic Indian Ocean tsunami. That experience improved relations with Indonesia and enhanced the trust and interoperability among their forces.

A subsequent "quadrilateral" dialogue in 2007—a meeting of officials to talk lessons learned from disaster relief—led to claims that the four seagoing democracies were using humanitarianism as a cloak to gang up on China.

These days China itself is supposedly capable of using its forces to do good while serving its own interests, such as through its counterpiracy taskforce in the Gulf of Aden. Another of these "new historic missions" used to justify China's ever-expanding military budget and naval power-projection capabilities is humanitarian relief.

So it's surprising that Beijing has not stepped up to help the Philippines. On the contrary, its response has been miserly and slow-moving. With an initial donation of only \$100,000, followed days later by a begrudging \$1.6 million worth of tents and blankets, China has allowed its South China Sea dispute with the Philippines to cloud its compassion and distort its diplomacy.

What is going on in Beijing? Sure, the Communist Party's big plenum has been meeting this week, but that is no excuse to delay responding to an international emergency.

Beijing is squandering an opportunity to show the kind of regional leadership it otherwise seems to want.

Some within the system are presumably arguing for a more generous policy. The Communist Party's Global Times newspaper warned that China will "suffer great losses" unless it changes tack fast and starts truly giving. But this view is losing out to the voices of narrow nationalism.

Things could still change somewhat if China suddenly makes a grand gesture. The People's Liberation Army has made great strides in its ability to project maritime power since it saw the way others used their forces to respond to the tsunami in 2004. It has large amphibious ships, growing fleets of helicopters, and an impressive hospital ship, the Peace Ark.

That ship recently returned from a four-month tour of smile diplomacy and medicine-dispensing, from the Maldives to Burma to Brunei, where it joined an international exercise to train for just such a disaster as this. In 2011 it even showed the flag in the Caribbean, no doubt to make a point to America and the world. Yet right now it can't seem to make it across the South China Sea.

While the Chinese fleet is idle, or busy watching territorial claims, U.S. Pacific Command has sent in an aircraft carrier and the Marines, with food, water, shelter and medics. America may not be giving massive sums of money at this stage either—the latest sum is about \$20 million—but it does not need to.

Instead, the rapid and large-scale response already underway by U.S. military forces is sending a signal that will be noticed across the region. It will give new meaning to the rebalance to Asia, at a time when some were starting to question Washington's commitment. This will more than compensate for President [Barack Obama's](#) absence from the East Asia Summit in Brunei last month.

Even more dramatically, Japan has announced a relief mission comprising its largest maritime deployment since World War II, with three naval ships including a flat-top helicopter carrier and up to 1,000 personnel. The Japanese will sail south on a mission in which they can be proud and to which no country can reasonably object.

This has real potential to undo some of the damage Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's views on history have inflicted on Japan's standing in the region, as well as to advance his drive to reinterpret the constitution and normalize the military's role in Japan's external policies.

Meanwhile Australia and Indonesia are among other regional powers using military assets to send in relief supplies. Even far-off Britain has sent in a well-equipped warship to help, diverting it from an exercise off Singapore. Almost every military seems willing

to deliver public goods to a stricken corner of the South China Sea, except for the biggest and closest.

The choice is now China's. By staying aloof, it will only have itself to blame if other countries end up cooperating and conferring without it. If Beijing continues to hold back, the result will be not only a self-wrought moral humiliation, but a potential inflection point in the contest for influence in the region and for legitimacy in the South China Sea.

At a time when American power and purpose are being questioned and China seems to be expanding its influence, the Haiyan disaster is a reminder that the U.S. remains the indispensable first-responder to Asian security contingencies of any kind. Whether it is about soft power or the effective deployment of military force, Beijing still has a long way to go.

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