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People's Liberation Army's HADR Operations in Oceania

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the People's Republic of China's (PRC) People's Liberation Army's (PLA) expanding humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) missions in Oceania. In particular, the paper highlights the significance of a provision for HA/DR in a security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands.

This paper is prepared as part of a series of research examining United States (U.S.) and China strategic competition in Oceania. The series seeks to inform U.S. military decision-makers, planners, and forces on multiple facets of the PRC's strategic influence efforts in the region, particularly as it concerns HA/DR. Forthcoming papers in this series will explore how China's diplomatic expansion has been enabled by its foreign humanitarian assistance; how China has deepened diplomatic ties through its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), and how the PRC conducts strategic communication of its HA/DR actions.

Key Takeaways:

- China's political warfare gives context to the role of the PRC's HA/DR missions as an instrument of strategic influence and an opportunity to enhance PLA operational capabilities.
- In the same way that the BRI has enabled the PRC to expand and deepen its diplomatic and economic relationships with Pacific Island countries (PIC), HA/DR missions will enable the PRC to expand its military presence in the Pacific region.
- Although the PLA is proficient in conducting HA/DR operations, the recent PRC HA/DR response to the 2022 Tonga volcanic eruption and tsunami highlighted some gaps in PLA capabilities, namely limitations in PLA air capabilities and ongoing lack of coordination on the part of the PRC/PLA with other foreign responding states during multinational HA/DR missions.

Strategic considerations:

- The China-Solomon Islands security agreement includes HA/DR as one of the main areas for security cooperation. This presents the PRC with an opportunity to justify the PLA's presence in the Solomon Islands to, for example, plan for HA/DR scenarios, to conduct HA/DR-relevant exercises, and to deploy a forward force to respond to HA/DR needs.
- Increased PLA presence justified for HA/DR action risks raising geo-political tensions, militarizing U.S.-China strategic competition, and polarizing regional and national politics.
- Recognizing that multinational HA/DR coordination is beneficial to optimal humanitarian aid delivery and that military-military engagements with the PLA may no longer be viable, other avenues for coordination could be explored through Chinese non-government organizations (NGO) and the Chinese diaspora, who also play a key role in PRC HA/DR missions.
- Climate change is one area where U.S. policy permits continued engagement with China and could be the focus of future U.S. Government (USG) civilian-civilian and people-people efforts.

Introduction

There has been a hardening of U.S-China strategic competition since the articulation of a tougher line against the PRC in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (Sutter & Limaye, 2020). The 2021 Interim National Security Strategy reiterates this firm stance and further outlines how the U.S. plans to out-compete a more assertive and authoritarian China. The PRC seeks to become a regional and global power and is deploying political warfare to increase its comprehensive national power and to challenge the U.S. and her allies. PRC political warfare is offensive and defensive in nature, takes the form of unrestricted warfare short of kinetic warfare, and is being conducted on an international scale (Gershanek, 2021). According to Indo-Pacific expert Pascal (2022), Oceania is on the front line of Chinese political warfare. It is a region that the PLA Navy must control if it is to have dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.

China's political warfare gives context to the role of the PRC's HA/DR missions as an instrument of strategic influence and an opportunity to enhance PLA operational capabilities. HA/DR missions typically involve a blend of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) capabilities, enabling the PRC to extend influence on multiple fronts (Watters & Triplett, 2021). HA/DR missions have enabled the PRC to burnish an image of itself as a responsible global power, enhance the operational capabilities of the PRC's PLA, and extend diplomatic influence over other countries (Southerland, 2019). HA/DR missions will enable the PRC to extend its DIME capabilities in the Pacific.

Since 2006, China has expanded its economic and diplomatic presence in the Pacific through soft loans, scholarships, immigration, commercial activity, military-to-military cooperation, and diplomatic engagements (Pascal, 2018). Through the rollout of the BRI in the Oceania since 2018, China is deepening its diplomatic and economic relationships with PICs. China has diplomatic ties with ten PICs after gaining official recognition from Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019. Both countries switched recognition from Taiwan to the PRC, in line with the PRC's insistence on adherence to the "One-China" policy (Tiezzi, 2020). All ten countries have signed up to the BRI starting with Papua New Guinea (PNG) in June 2018 (Wroe, 2018). Kiribati's proximity to Hawaii and the Solomon Islands' proximity to Australia, a U.S. "Five-Eyes" intelligence-sharing partner, has raised concerns that China's diplomatic presence could expand to a military presence in the two countries.

The PRC's diplomatic relationship with the Solomon Islands has culminated in a bilateral security pact, signed in late April 2022 and that could pave the way for a PLA presence in the Solomon Islands. Although at this time the text of the security agreement has not been made public, the PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, has stated that the agreement covers maintaining social order, protecting lives and property, and HA/DR. The inclusion of HA/DR in the security agreement, whether at Beijing's instigation or Honiara's, establishes a compelling justification for a PLA presence in the Solomon Islands. HA/DR is a widely accepted military mission in the Pacific. The region suffers from a high number of natural disasters and the absence of kinetic wars. Indeed, HA/DR is a typical mission for the U.S. military and other militaries operating in the Pacific. Whether the PRC will seek to establish a military presence in the Solomon Islands on HA/DR grounds is worth monitoring. Any increased PLA presence for the purpose of conducting HA/DR missions in the Pacific risks raising geo-political tensions, militarizing the U.S.-China strategic competition, and polarizing regional and national politics.

China's HA/DR

China defines HA/DR as 'emergency humanitarian aid' and as a component of its 'development cooperation,' the PRC's preferred term for describing its foreign aid. The nature of PRC foreign aid including its emergency humanitarian aid is opaque with a lack of public reporting about funding levels, decision-making structures, and policy goals beyond vaguely stated principles outlined in a series of Foreign Aid White Papers (2011, 2014, and 2021). PRC foreign aid is implemented by up to 33 different agencies (Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2022). PRC HA/DR responses to significant international HA/DR events is most likely led by the Leading Small Group, headed by President Xi Jinping and consisting of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo Standing Committee members responsible for national security issues in the State Council and various state ministries that are responsible for national security (Hirono, 2018). Most day-to-day decisions on HA/DR action is made by state agencies, including the Ministry of Commerce Department of Foreign Aid (MOFCOM), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Chinese International Development Cooperation Administration (CIDCA), the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), and the Ministry of Emergency Management (MEM) (Hirono, 2018; Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2022). The MEM was established in April 2018 as part of an effort to overhaul the PRC's domestic disaster management system. Considered a "super ministry," the MEM took over the disaster management powers and resources that were spread over 13 ministerial departments including MOCA's disaster relief responsibilities domestically (Yue, 2020; Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2022). Although the MEM's Department of International Cooperation and Rescue has taken over the international cooperation activities on disaster management previously conducted by MOCA, MOCA remains important to China's foreign aid as the number of Chinese NGOs working on overseas humanitarian assistance continues to grow.

The PRC's conception and implementation of HA/DR differs from traditional humanitarian actors including the U.S., European Union (EU), Japan, and other members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). China defines humanitarian assistance as a core part of its development aid, rather than treating development assistance and humanitarian assistance separately like many traditional donors. China ties humanitarian assistance to long-term development, viewing development assistance as fundamental to resolving humanitarian issues. China has also avoided deep engagements with international humanitarian structures and processes and is not a member of the OECD-DAC or the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Donor Support Group, nor is it a part of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (Hirono, 2018). Additionally, China adopts a state-centric and bilateral approach, often opting out of international standards of multinational cooperation and coordination for the advancement of HA/DR (Watters & Triplett, 2021; Westley-Smith, 2007). Furthermore, the majority of China's humanitarian assistance funding has been spent on responding to natural disasters rather than complex emergencies. Three reasons have been offered for this emphasis. The first is that natural disasters are less politically controversial than complex emergencies involving conflicts. China lacks experience in many areas of conflict and China's peripheral diplomacy has focused on countries in East Asia more likely to suffer from natural disasters than conflict. Congruent to this is

a greater empathy among the Chinese public for victims of natural disasters due to a shared experience with natural disasters (Hirono, 2018).

PRC political and military goals have overridden humanitarian considerations in PRC HA/DR missions. According to the Overseas Development Institute, China's diplomatic interest in countries is considered the most important factor guiding its aid. This connection is evidenced by the fact that African countries that vote with China at the UN get an average of an 86% increase in aid, as shown by the AIDData initiative at the College of William & Mary's Global Research Institute (Lieberman, 2018). China's initial reluctance to provide humanitarian aid to the Philippines in response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, likely due to tensions related to a territorial dispute in the South China Sea, is another example. Overall, China contributes funding to a very limited number of humanitarian crises per annum, prefers to provide funding bilaterally rather than through the UN and other multilateral agencies, and during 2002-2015 was ranked between 19th and 26th on the global list of donors (Hirono, 2018). However, experts have warned that because the PRC understands Western metrics for foreign aid and prefers to keep funding details out of the public view, China may be giving more than what can be measured through publicly available data (Pascal).

The PLA and HA/DR

The PLA plays a major role in PRC HA/DR missions alongside actors such as China International Search and Rescue (CISAR), the Red Cross Society of China, Chinese NGOs, and the Chinese diaspora in affected states. The PLA conducted one of its first HA/DR missions in 2002 when it delivered relief materials to Afghanistan after an earthquake (Southerland, 2019). In a 2004 speech, then President Hu Jintao outlined 'New Historic Missions' for the PLA, which expanded traditional security priorities to international issues including counter terrorism, peacekeeping, piracy, and HA/DR (Tielke, 2018). Over the past two decades, the PLA has expanded its involvement in HA/DR missions abroad. The PLA has increased both the range of HA/DR operations it performs and the number of personnel and types of assets it deploys, as well as its involvement in HA/DR exchanges with other militaries (Southerland, 2019). The PLA's HA/DR tasks include Disaster Relief (flood, typhoon, epidemic, emergency supplies, etc.), Earthquake Response/Relief, and the Logistics of Medical services (Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China Annual Report to Congress, 2021).

The PLA's expansion of HA/DR missions dovetails with its own organizational reform and enhanced operational capabilities. In 2015 and 2016, President Xi publicly launched the most ambitious reform and reorganization of the PLA since the 1950s. In 2017, Xi set goals for the PLA to "generally achieve mechanization" by 2020, to "basically complete" military modernization by 2035, and to "transform" the PLA into a "world-class" force by 2049—the same year by which Xi envisions China achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The PLA is improving its capabilities in every domain of warfare, have superior capabilities to other regional militaries in many areas, and is eroding U.S. military advantages in certain areas (Congressional Research Service, 2021a). According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2020), the PLA in 2020 had "already achieved parity with—or even exceeded—the United States" in areas such as shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems. The report also stated, "The PLA's evolving capabilities and concepts continue to

strengthen the PRC's ability to counter an intervention by an adversary in the Indo-Pacific region and project power globally" (Congressional Research Service, 2021b).

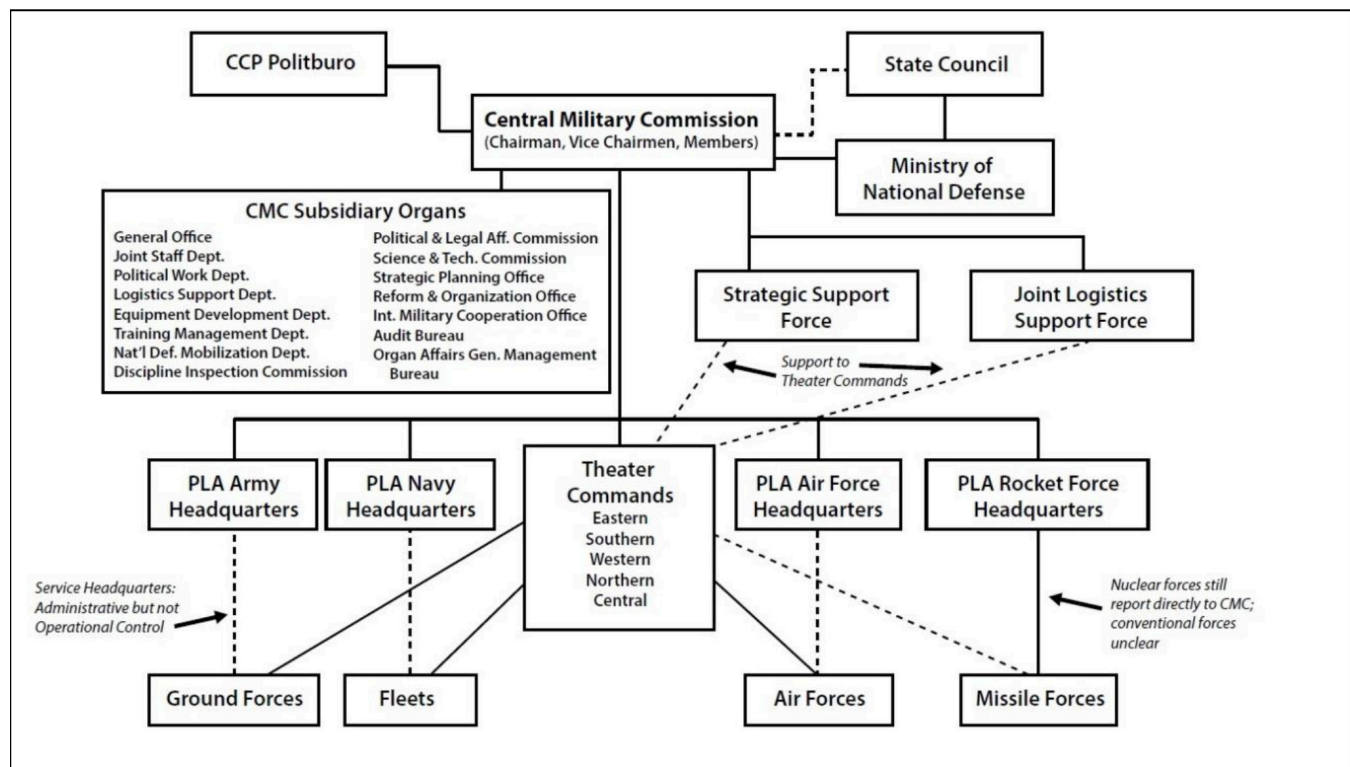


Figure 1: PLA Organizational Structure. Source: Congressional Research Service, *China's Military: The People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, 4 June 2021, 13.

The PLA views HA/DR as a means to test and enhance its operational proficiency and ability to operate overseas. Like combat operations abroad, HA/DR missions abroad require operational flexibility; the transport of troops, equipment, and materials; and the sustainment of the deployed force (Southerland, 2019). As an example, the 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy*, an authoritative text published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science, states, "Military operations other than war are an important means to enhance the military's operational capabilities." The text further explains that there are many similarities between the requirements for these operations, which include HA/DR, and combat operations, including in information and logistics support, and it argues that the PLA can use them as an opportunity to test its organizational and command capabilities and examine and enhance its combat readiness. Other authoritative textbooks published by the PLA on non-combat operations and joint operations have echoed these themes on HA/DR (Southerland, 2019).

Participating in HA/DR activities requires enhancements in equipment and doctrine to keep up with the requirements of conducting HA/DR outside of China's borders. China seeks to support this evolution through the coordinated use of the PLA's Navy (PLAN) and the PLA's Air Force (PLAAF) assets such as the *Peace Ark* hospital ship (Conan, 2018). Expansion of the HA/DR mission set for the PLAAF is achieved by acquisition of large cargo aircraft capable of long-range flights; these include Il-76 aircraft from Russia and Chinese manufactured Y-20 aircraft for the delivery of humanitarian equipment and supplies, as carried out in the PLA's first HA/DR mission to Afghanistan in 2002 (Garafola & Heath, 2017). The existence of the *Peace Ark* and long-range cargo aircraft reflect the growing capabilities and the increased operational reach of the PLA. With these growing capabilities, the PLA will likely increase

the frequency of interregional port calls and increase its involvement in nontraditional missions such as HA/DR operations (Kamphausen & Hines, 2015).

PLA Navy's Peace Ark

The PLAN is the world's largest naval force by number of ships, with approximately 350 battle force ships. The U.S. Navy, by comparison, has 293 battle force ships. Although PLAN's early focus was on coastal defense and "offshore defense" of China's maritime periphery, PLAN has taken on new roles as China's interests have expanded geographically. These new missions include sea lane protection in places like the Indian Ocean, naval diplomacy, and nontraditional security missions such as search and rescue and HA/DR (Congressional Research Service, 2021b).

The PLAN's *Peace Ark* hospital ship, modeled off the US Naval Ship (USNS) *Mercy* has been at the forefront of China's HA/DR missions (see Figure 2). The idea of building the *Peace Ark* emerged in the early 2000s when China was eager to develop and expand its HA/DR capabilities. This was arguably because China was well-equipped with hard power but realized soft power is the way to build its image which otherwise was clouded by deep suspicions about authoritarianism. Moreover, it served as a conduit to promote Chinese culture and enhance people-to-people exchanges. The *Peace Ark* has about 300 hospital beds and 120 medical personnel and was first deployed in response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 (Southerland, 2021).

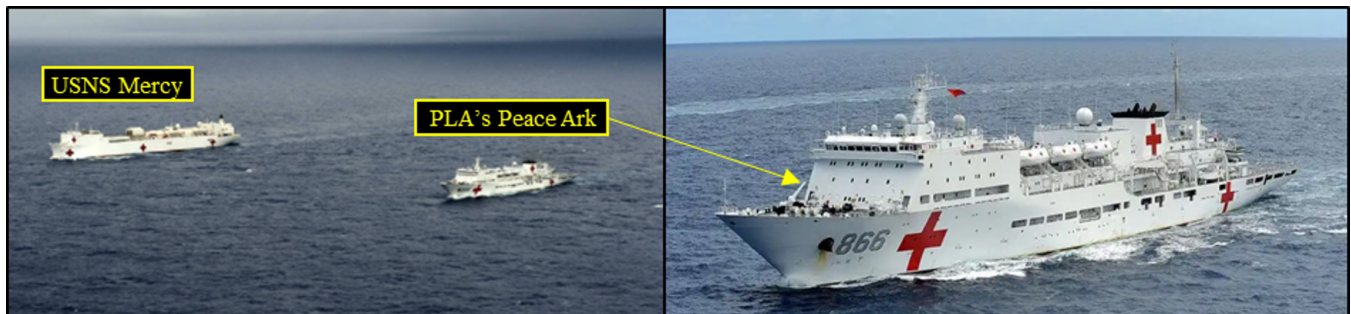


Figure 2: The USNS *Mercy* and the PLA's *Peace Ark* transit the Pacific Ocean during RIMPAC Exercise 2014. Source: Left: U.S. Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Pyoung K. Yi. Right: Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Shannon Renfro.

Since 2014, the *Peace Ark* has carried out medical assistance tours to the Southwest Pacific and other regions. *Peace Ark* tours in the Pacific have won public statements of appreciation from the Prime Ministers of Tonga and PNG (Archana & Li, 2018). Diplomatic opportunities have, then, fueled other *Peace Ark* missions like a 2018 tour of South Pacific islands (Conan, 2018). During the mission, Chinese medical professionals provided free medical treatment to more than 4,000 people in PNG's capital, Port Moresby, 4,500 people in Vanuatu, 6,000 people in Fiji, and more than 5,500 patients in Tonga (Archana & Li, 2018).

The *Peace Ark* is instrumental in enhancing China's influence as a provider of a humanitarian good. The fact that *Peace Ark* is welcomed in countries like Fiji (in 2014 and again in 2018) is another case in point. These China-Fiji exchanges reflect a pattern of diplomacy that underscores its increasing priorities, which provide opportunities to bolster key diplomatic, economic, and strategic objectives for both sides. This is manifested in Beijing's involvement and support of Fiji's hosting of the annual Pacific Island's

Forum (PIF) and Pacific Islands Development Forum, via which China can maintain a relative degree of diplomatic leverage. Indeed, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Lu Kang, commented that *Peace Ark's* assistance to other countries is China's way of promoting international humanitarianism and practicing peace, development, and cooperation.

In addition to large hospital ships, large amphibious ships and large transport aircraft increase the PLA's ability to conduct HA/DR missions globally (see Figure 3). Indeed, since 2014, the PLAN has deployed three large amphibious ships, Yuzhao-class landing platforms docks (LPD, Type 071), named Kunlunshan, Jinggangshan, and Changbais-han. These Yuzhao-class LPDs are capable of amphibious, logistical, and HA/DR operations, and are equipped to support expeditionary operations and nontraditional security missions around the world, such as delivering equipment, supplies, and personnel. An expanded set of missions such as HA/DR missions, survey voyages, and goodwill port visits have increased demands on these vessels. This builds toward the PLA's secondary focus on nontraditional security missions, which require, according to Chinese leaders, the complete modernization of the PLA by 2035 to execute overseas joint operations (Congressional Research Service, 2021c).



Figure 3: Yuzhao (Type 071) Amphibious Ship. Estimated displacement of more than 19,855 tons; for comparison, the U.S. Navy's new San Antonio (LPD-17) class amphibious ship has an estimated displacement of 25,000 tons. Source: Congressional Research Service, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress*, Updated 27 January, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/248>.

PLAAF

China's air power resides primarily in the PLAAF and the Naval Aviation branch of the PLAN. China's air forces constitute the third-largest in the world and the largest in the Indo-Pacific region (Congressional Research Service, 2021b). The PLAAF's more expansive role encompasses both defensive and offensive air operations at greater distances from China's land borders. PRC strategists and leaders frequently refer to the PLAAF's transformation into a "strategic air force," reflecting the rise of the PLAAF's status among the PLA services, the expansion of its capabilities, and growing expectations for its contributions to China's overall national security (Congressional Research Service, 2021b). According to the 2013 Science of Military Strategy, missions assigned to the PLAAF include conducting defensive and offensive operations against threats emanating from the maritime southeast (primarily Taiwan); conducting homeland air defense; safeguarding China's maritime interests; conducting humanitarian disaster relief, domestic stability, and other emergency operations; and participating in international operations such as peacekeeping, international rescue, escorts and evacuations, and military exercises with foreign militaries (Congressional Research Service, 2021b).

Large cargo aircraft capable of long-range flights enhance the PLAAF capability. These include O-76 aircraft from Russia and Chinese manufactured Y-20 aircraft (Cole, 2015). Despite these acquisitions, experts suggest substantial improvements to PLA capabilities are still needed, including increases in sealift and airlift assets. Moreover, PLAAF transport crews have had few opportunities to operate in distant regions aside from non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) and foreign military exercises (Wuthnow, Saunders & McCaslin, 2021).



Figure 4: China's PLA Y-20 cargo plane. Source: Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, 'Spotting of six Y-20 cargo planes in Serbia displays China's strategic transport capabilities,' Global Times, 10 April 2022, accessed 21 April 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1258931.shtml>

The PLA's Tonga HA/DR Mission

The recent PRC response to the Tonga volcanic eruption and tsunami on 15 January 2022 highlighted some gaps in PLA capabilities, namely its air transport capabilities. The first batch of Chinese aid to Tonga was carried by two PLAAF Y-20 heavy transport aircraft (see Figure 4), which departed from the PRC's humanitarian platform in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou and stopped three times in Indonesia, PNG, and Fiji to refuel to complete the journey of about 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles) to Tonga. Two PLAN vessels brought the second batch of aid, also setting off from Guangzhou. PLAN's landing platform dock Wuzhishan and replenishment ship Chaganhu carried more than 1,400 tons of aid, which included "mobile homes, tractors, generators, water pumps and purifiers, food and medical equipment" (Waidelich, 2022). Waidelich (2022) noted that the need for the PLAAF Y-20 to make frequent stops could motivate the PLA to gain overflight access or refueling agreements with more Indo-Pacific countries in the near term. In the longer-term, the PLA may seek to establish one or more bases in the Pacific islands (Waidelich, 2022). The China-Solomon Islands security pact alludes to the possibility of a military base in the Solomon Islands, a development potentially justifiable for HA/DR missions.

The PRC's lack of willingness to coordinate with other foreign countries during multinational HA/DR missions is another gap in its HA/DR capabilities and has implications for optimal humanitarian assistance delivery. During the Tonga response, the PLA did not coordinate with the HA/DR International Coordination Cell established by Australia's Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) (Waidelich, 2022). However, this should not come as a surprise to other responding nations. The PRC's preference to coordinate only bilaterally with the host government and the Chinese diaspora in the affected state, and not with other responding foreign countries, has been well noted since the multinational response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake. According to Southerland (2019), when foreign militaries were assigned lead sectors, the PLA "treated their sector like sovereign territory, rather than an area where they would lead the coordination of response." In some cases the lack of coordination on the PRC's part has undermined the ability of other nations to deliver humanitarian assistance. For example, during response efforts to Tropical Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu in 2020, a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) plane carrying aid to Port Vila was unable to land when an A320 charter flight from China was running late unloading its humanitarian cargo at Port Vila airport (Needham 2020). The incident highlighted how a lack of coordination and miscommunication can impede the effective delivery of relief during multinational HA/DR efforts.

The PLA's Military-Military HA/DR Exercises

For the PLA, participation in bilateral and multilateral military-military HA/DR exercises functions as a channel to foster cooperation with other countries, enabling the PLA to create a learning platform to develop HA/DR best practices, procedures, and operational capacity to respond to future natural

disasters. The U.S. and China conducted an annual Disaster Management Exchange (DME) from 2005 through 2020. The DME was an annual U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) disaster risk reduction event with China's PLA. The last U.S.-China DME was held virtually 11-14 November 2020 and was attended by approximately 50 military personnel from the U.S. and China. The three-day online seminar covered topics on humanitarian assistance and disaster risk reduction. The U.S. and allies' efforts to engage with China in HA/DR exchanges reflects a concerted effort by international HA/DR actors to avoid politicization of humanitarian aid and to promote coordination for the benefit of optimal HA/DR action.

Since 2011, the PLA has expanded its network of HA/DR exchange partners, conducting bilateral exercises with Australia, Cambodia, Germany, India, Malaysia, and New Zealand (Southerland, 2019). Some bilateral exchanges have expanded to multilateral exercises.

For example, Exercise Cooperation Spirit was first undertaken as a bilateral exercise between Australia and China in 2011 and was subsequently expanded into a quadrilateral exercise including Australia, China, New Zealand, and the U.S. These exercises have included seminars and table-top exercises based on a fictitious scenario of cyclone damage, earthquake response, and flooding in a South Pacific nation (Australian Government Department of Defense, 2012). A PRC Defense White Paper noted that as the PRC's regional and international interests grow more complex, the PLA's international engagements would likely continue to expand (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

PLA Participation in Multilateral HA/DR Exercises in the Pacific		
Exercise Name	Host	Participating countries
Cooperation Spirit 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017	Australia	Australia, China, U.S., New Zealand
Tropic Twilight 2016, 2018	New Zealand	Tonga, New Zealand, U.S., France, China

Table 1: PLA HA/DR Exercise Participation in Oceania.

While these exercises and exchanges are designed to strengthen HA/DR cooperation and interoperability, China has exploited HA/DR exchanges to learn combat skills from and gather intelligence on advanced militaries, particularly the U.S. and its allies and partners (Southerland, 2019). Southerland (2019) reported, “Although U.S. law prohibits exchanges that would enhance PLA combat capabilities, the PLA has sometimes been able to practice skills that are directly applicable to combat operations during HA/DR exercises with other countries, which occasionally have included U.S. participation.” With the hardening of the U.S.-China strategic competition, military-military exercises such as the DME with China are no longer taking place.

Conclusion

In the same way that the BRI has enabled the PRC to expand and deepen its diplomatic and economic relationships with PICs, HA/DR missions will enable the PRC to expand its military presence in the Pacific region. The China-Solomon Islands security agreement includes HA/DR as one of the main areas

for security cooperation. This presents the PRC with an opportunity to justify the PLA's presence in the Solomon Islands to, for example, plan for HA/DR scenarios, to conduct HA/DR-relevant exercises, and to deploy a forward force to respond to HA/DR needs. An increased PLA presence for the purpose of conducting HA/DR missions in the Pacific risks raising geo-political tensions, militarizing the U.S.-China strategic competition, and polarizing regional and national politics. The U.S. and partners have sought to avoid the politicization of HA/DR through continued bilateral and multilateral exchanges. However, U.S.-China military-military HA/DR exchanges may no longer be tenable due to the opportunity that these exercises present to China's PLA to test and enhance combat capabilities. Recognizing that multinational HA/DR coordination is beneficial to optimal humanitarian aid delivery, and that engagements with the PLA may no longer be viable, other avenues for coordination could be explored through Chinese NGOs and the Chinese diaspora, who also play a key role in PRC HA/DR missions. Climate change is one area where U.S. policy permits continued engagement with China and could be the focus of future civilian-civilian and people-people efforts.

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