

China's Meager Typhoon Relief Aid: Is Beijing Sending a Geopolitical Message?

By Ted Galen Carpenter

November 28, 2013

While nations in the international community, especially Japan, Australia, and the United States, rushed to provide generous relief aid to the Philippines in the aftermath of devastating Typhoon Haiyan, China's response has been noticeably different. Beijing initially offered a paltry \$100,000 in aid funds, and only with apparent reluctance eventually upped that total to a still very modest \$1.6 million. That parsimonious conduct produced widespread condemnation, both in East Asia and around the world.

It also led to considerable speculation about why Chinese officials would risk such a public relations debacle. Some experts contended that the response underscored decision making and logistical deficiencies in China's political system. They argued that China's military, for example, was simply incapable of delivering aid quickly and efficiently the way the U.S. military was already doing in the Philippines—and had done in previous natural disasters, such as the tsunami that devastated Indonesia and other countries in 2010. Retired Admiral Timothy Keating, former head of the U.S. Pacific Command, told the *Financial Times* that “they just don't have the hardware, the equipment, the training that the U.S., Australia, Japan and Thailand have.” Ian Storey, a regional expert at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, offered a slightly more favorable assessment, noting that China has substantially increased its disaster relief logistical capability over the past decade. However, “at present it is not even close to matching the capabilities of the United States.”

Other experts, though, noted that such logistical limitations did not explain the failure to be far more generous with cash assistance. That behavior, they contended, indicated that the Chinese regime was utterly callous to the fate of other people. China, such critics concluded, cared only about itself and its narrow national interests. Writing in the *National Interest Online*, Walter Lohman, director of Asian Studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, stated bluntly that China's interest “is not in becoming a contributing stake holder, along with the U.S.

and its allies, in maintaining a liberal, equitable, peaceful regional order.” Indeed, China’s version appears to leave “no room for basic human decency.”

Such explanations may have some partial validity, but there is another thesis that likely has greater explanatory power. Beijing’s relations with Manila have been quite tense in recent years, primarily because of competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. Tensions flared in the spring of 2012 when the Philippines deployed several ships around Scarborough Shoal (which China calls Huangyan Island) to strengthen its stance. Beijing reacted harshly to that move, gradually sending numerous fishing vessels and naval patrol boats to the area. It appeared that the bilateral quarrel was easing in June when the government of President Benigno S. Aquino ordered his country’s ships to leave the area. The Chinese foreign ministry promptly praised that move as a welcome, conciliatory gesture.

But the cordial atmosphere between the two countries soon faded. Reports circulated that the Aquino government intended not only to have the Philippine ships return to the disputed waters, but that Manila would ask the United States to initiate patrols by aerial drones to monitor Chinese moves in the area. Although Aquino later denied that his government sought such patrols, Beijing’s reaction to the reports was just short of furious. An editorial in *China Daily* accused Manila of being “obsessed with playing the role of troublemaker in the South China Sea.” The latest episode, the editorial went on, “shows Manila is determined to drag Washington into its maritime dispute with China. By seeking backup from the U.S. in its quarrel with Beijing, Manila has ignored the goodwill shown by Beijing and is trying hard to complicate the issue.”

Matters have not improved much since then. The latest upsurge in tensions began earlier this year when the Philippines filed an unprecedented arbitration case—over Beijing’s strenuous objections—regarding South China Sea territorial claims with the United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea. That case is now pending, and Chinese officials are doing a slow burn.

Indeed, those officials have been increasingly irritated at the overall conduct of the Philippines government—including the noticeable strengthening of Manila’s military ties with Washington and a renewed receptivity to host U.S. forces. One should not underestimate the depth of China’s anger about those developments, or the willingness of Chinese officials to “send Manila a message”—perhaps by withholding humanitarian aid during a time of great need. It would also serve as an indirect message to Vietnam, Malaysia, and other nations in Southeast Asia that challenge Beijing’s position regarding territorial issues in the South China Sea. The message

would be that there is a substantial price to pay for any nation that defies China's policy preferences and seeks to undermine China's interests.

A determination to send a harsh geopolitical message could explain why Beijing was willing to incur the inevitable negative publicity by being so ungenerous with relief aid. At a minimum, analysts should not rule out that possibility and merely assume that the Chinese are logistically challenged or congenitally heartless. Neither explanation makes much sense in this situation. And if Beijing is determined to demonstrate to its neighbors the price and perils of defiance, regardless of the adverse public relations fallout, we may have underestimated just how seriously Chinese officials regard their country's territorial claims. That would suggest that Washington and its East Asian allies may need to re-evaluate their positions on those issues and take a more cautious, conciliatory stance toward China.