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# China's overseas humanitarian action to assist refugees

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## Summary

- In recent years, China has expanded its overseas humanitarian action to assist refugees, including through increased funding to UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagement, and growth in the overseas activities of Chinese civil society. This trend is consistent with the overall rise in Chinese involvement across UN issue areas in the last decade.
- Chinese government agencies, civil society and private companies have significant domestic experience and technical expertise in natural disaster response, emergency preparedness, public health, rural development, renewable energy and digital technology. This technical expertise can support humanitarian responses, particularly as displacement crises become increasingly linked to climate change.
- A challenge for Chinese actors is how to translate high-level commitments into tangible outcomes and partnerships, within a transparent and robust framework for overseas humanitarian action. Despite some upward trends, Chinese humanitarian action in aid of refugees should not be overestimated. China's financial contributions in this area remain sporadic, refugee assistance is not a foreign policy priority, the topic remains sensitive domestically and geopolitical tensions risk stifling global cooperation.
- The rise in China's overseas humanitarian activities should be considered in the broader context of the Asia-Pacific, where national governments often play a central role in humanitarianism and disaster relief. Japan's status as a leading humanitarian donor and India's mixed history of hosting displaced populations provide contrasting examples of the roles of donor countries and soft power in the region, and demonstrate the different degrees of integration within conventional humanitarian institutions and norms.
- In parallel with China's growing global influence, the humanitarian sector itself is changing due to the shifting donor landscape and compounding humanitarian pressures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis. The extent to which international and Chinese actors are able and willing to navigate the differences in each other's approach is key in determining whether international organizations and local communities will collaborate with Chinese partners on refugee relief.

## Introduction

China has huge potential to impact the plight of forcibly displaced people around the world.<sup>1</sup> The country is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the second largest funder of the UN,<sup>2</sup> and an active contributor on thematic issues such as economic development, humanitarian aid and UN peacekeeping operations. As a result, China's international footprint cannot go unnoticed

Yet, within a growing body of literature on China's overseas humanitarian action, the country's approach to displacement crises remains under-analysed.<sup>3</sup> This paper aims to help fill the gap, and build on analysis by scholars in the field such as Dr Lili Song and Dr Miwa Hirono.

This research paper presents a desk review and primary source analysis that draw from the Chinese government's funding, partnerships, public statements, and diplomatic engagement on refugee issues – with a focus on developments from the 2016 UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants through to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis also considers a broad range of Chinese actors, such as provincial governments, civil society organizations (CSOs) and private companies.

## **China's overseas assistance to refugees has increased steadily – albeit moderately – in a number of areas, which is consistent with the overall uptick in Chinese involvement in the UN system over the last decade.**

To situate Chinese engagement within the trends of the Asia-Pacific region, the analysis compares Chinese humanitarian policies to those of other regional players, Japan and India. Japan's leadership as a top donor country in the international humanitarian system and India's history of hosting displaced people provide a regional lens to contextualize perceptions and expectations of Chinese activities within the international humanitarian sector. The focus on regional comparisons brings refugee relief into wider debates around the Chinese government's approach to global governance and its role within the UN system.

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<sup>1</sup> This report uses the term 'China' to refer to the Chinese central government. However, it is important to bear in mind that 'China' is not a monolithic entity, as is often implied in publications discussing Chinese foreign policy. For further reading on the range of interests and different stakeholders influencing Chinese foreign policy, see, Yu, J. and Ridout, L. (2021), *Who decides China's foreign policy? The role of central government, provincial-level authorities and state-owned enterprises*, Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/11/who-decides-chinas-foreign-policy>.

<sup>2</sup> The current contributions scale, valid for 2019 to 2021, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018. The four largest contributors to the UN – the US (22 per cent of the UN budget), China (12.005 per cent), Japan (8.564 per cent) and Germany (6.090 per cent) – together finance 49 per cent of the entire UN budget. German Federal Foreign Office (2021), 'Background information: Contributions to the United Nations budget', <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/internationale-organisationen/vereintenationen/-/281336>.

<sup>3</sup> Refugees are defined and protected in international law. The 1951 Refugee Convention is a key legal document and defines a refugee as: 'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.' As of mid-2021, 84 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including 26.6 million registered refugees, 4.4 million asylum-seekers, 48 million internally displaced people, as well as Venezuelans displaced abroad and stateless people. UNHCR (2021), 'Refugee Population Statistics Database, Updated as of mid-2021', <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics> (accessed 2 Jan. 2022).

The research also draws from semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, between June 2021 and January 2022. Interviewees included representatives from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in China, Japan and India, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the European Union (EU) Delegation to China, Mercy Corps in China, the Chinese Red Cross Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as well as regional academic and policy experts. No Chinese government-affiliated officials were interviewed as part of this study, which is an area for further research and engagement on the topic. Future research would also greatly benefit from the perspectives of aid-receiving countries and local actors partnering with Chinese organizations.

China's overseas assistance to refugees has increased steadily – albeit moderately – in a number of areas, which is consistent with the overall uptick in Chinese involvement in the UN system over the last decade. Chinese organizations have the capacity to utilize domestic experience and technical expertise to improve humanitarian responses – from public health to disaster relief. China's growing humanitarian partnerships within the UN system must be carefully negotiated to reflect the interests of all parties, but structural and political obstacles can stifle cooperation between international and Chinese partners. A key challenge for Chinese actors is how to translate high-level commitments into tangible outcomes and sustainable partnerships, within a transparent and robust framework for overseas humanitarian action. It is important not to overestimate Chinese engagement on refugee relief: the issue area remains sensitive within Chinese society and China's approach to humanitarianism and its related institutions is evolving.

### Box 1. Defining humanitarian assistance

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines humanitarian assistance as: 'Aid that seeks to save lives and alleviate suffering of a crisis-affected population. Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality, as stated in UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182. In addition, the UN seeks to provide humanitarian assistance with full respect for the sovereignty of States. Assistance may be divided into three categories – direct assistance, indirect assistance and infrastructure support – which have diminishing degrees of contact with the affected population.'<sup>4</sup>

In January 2021, China's State Council published a white paper, *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*,<sup>5</sup> which is the latest high-level update addressing China's overseas humanitarian and development cooperation activities and priorities. The document follows two previous white papers on foreign aid published

<sup>4</sup> OCHA (2008), 'ReliefWeb Glossary of Humanitarian Terms', ReliefWeb, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/reliefweb-glossary-humanitarian-terms-enko>.

<sup>5</sup> State Council (2021), 'Full text: China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era', [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content\\_WS5ffa6bbbc6d0f72576943922.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content_WS5ffa6bbbc6d0f72576943922.html).

in 2011 and 2014. In the 2021 white paper, the State Council defined international development cooperation as: 'China's bilateral and multilateral efforts, within the framework of South–South cooperation, to promote economic and social development through foreign aid, humanitarian assistance, and other means.' For the first time, the white paper also included a section outlining Chinese involvement in international assistance to refugees.

China's overseas humanitarian assistance has traditionally focused on natural disasters, rather than on 'complex emergencies' (those that involve political or socio-economic factors).<sup>6</sup> In this latter category of assistance, China's engagement is diverse, context-specific and generally very limited. Moreover, humanitarian assistance and development aid are often linked within domestic approaches. In Chinese political rhetoric, economic development is described as a necessary condition for a country to achieve peace and stability, and therefore mitigate humanitarian crises in the long term. Some scholars, such as He Yin, refer to this notion as 'developmental peace' (发展和平 – fāzhǎn hépíng),<sup>7</sup> and such recognition provides an intellectual foundation to this foreign policy approach.

## Domestic geography and history

As for any country, China's domestic experiences and national interests affect its participation in multilateral efforts to address displacement. While China's domestic treatment of asylum seekers and refugees is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief overview of China's legal, geographical and historical context provides a useful background to the analysis of its overseas humanitarian action.

China is a signatory of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. China ratified both instruments in 1982, one of the first countries in Asia to do so. However, ratification alone is not a sufficient indicator of a country's engagement and commitment to assisting and protecting forcibly displaced people. In China's case, significant gaps persist today. For example, the country does not have a national asylum law and protection framework.<sup>8</sup>

Tied with Russia, China has the most land borders (14) of any country in the world, extending for approximately 14,000 miles. These borderlands are very diverse. Cross-border movements, borderland rural development, informal economies and border security are issues that local Chinese governments regularly manage, in contrast to other donor countries that are geographically more isolated, such as Japan. The space for discrepancies between Chinese central and provincial

<sup>6</sup> Hirono, M. (2018), 'Exploring the links between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action: multiple interests, processes and actors', HPG Working Paper, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), <https://odi.org/en/publications/exploring-the-links-between-chinese-foreign-policy-and-humanitarian-action-multiple-interests-processes-and-actors>.

<sup>7</sup> He, Y. (2017), '发展和平: 联合国维和建和中的中国方案 [Developmental peace: China's plan for peacekeeping and peacebuilding in the United Nations]', China Peacekeeping Police Training Center, Chinese People's Armed Police Force Academy, <https://www.jis.pku.edu.cn/docs/2018-06/20180626100034236637.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> For further reading on China's domestic legal context and its engagement in the legal and institutional frameworks of the global refugee regime, see, Song, L. (2020), *Chinese Refugee Law and Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108669474>.



government interests and policies is of particular note here. For example, in China's southwest Yunnan province at the border with Myanmar, Beijing generally devolves authority for the management of ethnic minority groups living there to the provincial government.<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates that a variety of actors are involved in China's policies on cross-border issues across the country's diverse geographies.

Historically, Chinese engagement on displacement issues is not new – but rather, long-standing and mixed. For example, during the Second World War, approximately 20,000 Jewish people found refuge in China.<sup>10</sup> Between 1978 and 1982, China admitted over 250,000 Vietnamese refugees who crossed the border into southern China, resulting in what has been described as 'one of the most successful local integration programmes'.<sup>11</sup> Today, China borders countries with significant refugee concerns – such as Myanmar and North Korea – but enacts stricter border policies. For example, China enforces a hard border in the northeast with North Korea, and has been criticized by the UN for cases of forced repatriation and refoulement.<sup>12</sup>

Today, refugees and asylum remain sensitive topics in China. For example, attitudes towards refugees on Chinese social media are generally quite negative. Scholar Song Jing's critical discourse analysis of social media posts on the Zhihu platform pointed to Chinese nationalism, Islamophobia and anti-Western sentiments as contributing to negative attitudes towards refugees.<sup>13</sup> The sensitivity of the topic within Chinese society is a key factor to consider when analysing prospects for Chinese current and future involvement in overseas humanitarian responses.

## China's diplomatic engagement

China regularly participates in multilateral forums dedicated to refugee relief and in recent years has increased its public statements and commitments. This section highlights key trends in Chinese diplomatic high-level engagement on refugee issues that are consistent with the country's approach to foreign policy and multilateral activity.

As noted by Lili Song, China's pledges of support and financial assistance at the 2016 UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants and the 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation suggested a growing desire to be seen by the international community as an active contributor to international refugee assistance efforts.<sup>14</sup> Since then, China actively participated in consultations

<sup>9</sup> Yu and Ridout (2021), *Who decides China's foreign policy?*

<sup>10</sup> BBC Travel (2021), 'How China saved more than 20,000 Jews during WW2', <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210405-how-china-saved-more-than-20000-jews-during-ww2>.

<sup>11</sup> Song, J. (2007), 'Vietnamese refugees well settled in China, await citizenship', UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/464302994.html>.

<sup>12</sup> For further reading please refer to: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2014), 'North Korea: UN Commission Documents Wide-Ranging and Ongoing Crimes Against Humanity, Urges Referral to ICC', <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14255&LangID=E>.

<sup>13</sup> Song, J. (2021), 'There is No Unconditional Love: Decoding Anti-Refugee Sentiments on Chinese Social Media', master's thesis, MA in Middle Eastern studies, Stockholm University.

<sup>14</sup> Song, L. (2019), 'The power of giving: China deepens involvement in refugee affairs', in Golley, J., Jaivin, L., Farrelly P. J. and Strange, S. (2019) (eds), *China Story Yearbook: Power*, pp. 313–316, Canberra, Australia: ANU Press, doi: 10.22459/CSY.2019.

and affirmed two key non-binding multilateral texts for the governance of asylum and migration – the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration.

At the UN-led Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, which convened governments and actors to help reach the goals of the Global Compact on Refugees, Chinese officials highlighted the country's contributions to the employment and livelihoods of refugees through bilateral channels – the Belt and Road Initiative and the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF) – and stated China's willingness to contribute further in this area.<sup>15</sup> China also co-sponsored the high-level dialogue on jobs and livelihoods at the Global Refugee Forum to provide support for thematic issue, but did not make any formal pledges. Overall, China has remained consistently engaged in UN-led multilateral forums and consultative processes on refugees and migration issues.

Chinese rhetoric on refugee issues conforms with the country's broader foreign policy messaging. For example, the well-established rhetoric on 'building a shared community for mankind' permeates senior Chinese diplomatic leaders' remarks on refugee issues, confirming the consistency of language across foreign policy issue areas. In September 2020, China issued a position paper on the 75th anniversary of the UN and referred to the 'principle of common but differentiated responsibilities' for state contributions to refugee issues.<sup>16</sup> China's tendency to emphasize its history as a developing country within the UN system is a necessary lens through which to understand its cautious approach to sharing responsibility for refugee relief.

Chinese officials have highlighted poverty and underdevelopment as root causes of instability and human displacement. For example, in 2016, Premier Li Keqiang stated, 'It must be recognized that war, conflict, and poverty are the main causes of the refugee issue, and the only way out is to realize peace and development.'<sup>17</sup> In 2019, China's then permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador Chen Xu, in his remarks at the Global Refugee Forum highlighted 'development as the first priority'.<sup>18</sup> Chinese leaders have often noted in their statements that 'comprehensive policies covering both the symptoms and the root causes' are needed to solve refugee issues. Poverty alleviation continues to be a key focus for Chinese officials when engaging with humanitarian and/or peace and security issues – this includes refugee crises.

China's permanent member status on the UN Security Council renders the Chinese government a political actor on issues of humanitarian access and relief. In 2021, at the UN Security Council, Zhang Jun, China's ambassador to the UN, called for member states to 'refrain from using the issue of refugees for political motives'

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<sup>15</sup> Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland (2019), 'Statement by Ambassador Chen Xu, Head of the Chinese Delegation, at the High-level Dialogue on Employment and People's Livelihood at the First Global Refugee Forum', <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegv/chn/dbtxwx/t1726630.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2020), 'Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations', [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202009/t20200910\\_679639.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202009/t20200910_679639.html).

<sup>17</sup> The State Council of the People's Republic of China (2016), 'Premier calls for concerted efforts to address refugee crisis', [http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2016/09/21/content\\_281475447579922.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2016/09/21/content_281475447579922.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland (2019), 'Statement by Ambassador Chen Xu'.



and for humanitarian access to respect national sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> These statements recall China's long-standing focus on non-intervention and national sovereignty. In some instances, China's use of the veto on the Security Council has even stifled humanitarian responses for refugee and internally displaced persons' relief, for example by vetoing Security Council resolutions on aid delivery and cross-border crossings into Syria.<sup>20</sup>

Chinese government officials have also addressed refugee issues in other diplomatic settings. UNRWA officials highlighted the BRICS summit as a forum in which China has a strong voice and has engaged on refugee issues, for example by endorsing UNRWA's work on the BRICS summit Johannesburg Declaration in 2018.<sup>21</sup> In China, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi attended the Belt and Road Forum and the Boao Forum for Asia, where leading Chinese tech companies Baidu, Tencent, and China UnionPay expressed their willingness to work together to support the plight of displaced people globally.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, refugee issues also increasingly permeate China's bilateral relations. China has made bilateral in-kind contributions to support refugee relief activities to the governments of Jordan, Lebanon and Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup> In 2017, the Chinese government also positioned itself as a mediator between Myanmar and Bangladesh with a proposed three-step solution to the Rohingya crisis,<sup>24</sup> taking on a frontline role in a refugee situation in the Asia-Pacific region. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi identified underdevelopment in Myanmar's Rakhine state as a key reason for instability and internal conflicts.<sup>25</sup> At the time, this also enabled China's support for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Rakhine state in conjunction with poverty alleviation interventions, while the UN considered Rakhine state as unsafe for refugee voluntary return.

## Engagement with international organizations

Financial contributions from the Chinese government to multilateral agencies working on refugee issues have increased over the last decade. On refugee relief, Chinese contributions tend to rely on multilateral channels such as the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), given the often complex nature of humanitarian emergencies affecting refugees. This is at odds with the broader trend in Chinese overseas humanitarianism. Generally, Chinese humanitarian aid for disaster relief is coordinated with affected countries rather than international organizations – for example by supporting hospitals and physical infrastructure or by sending personnel.

<sup>19</sup> Xinhuanet (2021), 'Chinese envoy calls for int'l solidarity on refugee issue', [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/08/c\\_1310357787.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/08/c_1310357787.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Nichols, M. (2020), 'Russia, China veto U.N. approval of aid deliveries to Syria from Turkey', Reuters, 7 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-un-idUSKBN24834N>.

<sup>21</sup> Research interview, officials from external relations department, UNRWA, October 2021.

<sup>22</sup> UNHCR (2019), 'UN refugee chief connects with Chinese companies at Boao Forum', <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2019/3/5c9df95b4/un-refugee-chief-connects-chinese-companies-boao-forum.html>.

<sup>23</sup> OCHA (undated), 'China, Government, 2020 – donor data', <https://fts.unocha.org/donors/2976/flows/2020> (accessed 2 Jan. 2022). Please refer to Annex 1 for a full list of Chinese government funded projects and in-kind contributions for refugee relief.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, Y. (2017), 'China draws three-stage path for Myanmar, Bangladesh to resolve Rohingya crisis', Reuters, 20 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-idUSKBN1DK0AL>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

From 1990 and until 2009, China's annual donation to UNHCR was \$250,000 in most years,<sup>26</sup> and since then China's contribution to UNHCR has rapidly increased, with data and analysis documenting this increase presented by Lili Song in 2018.<sup>27</sup> As shown in Table 1, Chinese contributions to UNHCR and UNRWA pale in comparison to leading donors like Japan, but they are closer to other countries often also categorized as 'emerging donors', such as India. It is important to note that funding to international organizations is one metric for country engagement, but it is not fully representative of a country's support to displaced people (India's long-standing hosting of displaced people within its territory is discussed below). The quality and allocation of funding must also be considered for a comprehensive analysis. For example, in discussion with Chinese government partners, UNHCR has been advocating more flexible and unearmarked funding to allow for rapid responses to emergency situations.<sup>28</sup>

**Table 1.** Funding received by UNHCR and UNRWA (\$)

UNHCR						
Donor	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
China	2,817,942	11,144,039	1,232,626	1,924,229	1,765,630	5,329,982
Japan	164,726,114	152,359,773	120,024,776	126,466,093	126,332,049	140,577,508
India	14,788	0	7,705	0	0	0
UNRWA						
China	300,000	350,000	2,350,000	1,000,000	3,291,904	2,040,920
Japan	44,497,635	43,373,337	44,999,224	43,438,361	33,080,021	50,510,511
India	1,250,000	1,250,000	5,000,000	5,000,000	5,000,000	5,000,000

Sources: UNHCR: Compiled by the author from UNHCR (2017), 'Funding UNHCR's Programmes', in *UNHCR Global Report*, p. 24, [https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/gr2016/pdf/02\\_Funding.pdf](https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/gr2016/pdf/02_Funding.pdf); UNHCR (2018), 'Contributions to UNHCR – 2017', <https://www.unhcr.org/5954c4257.pdf>; UNHCR (2022), 'Donor Ranking, 2018–21', <https://reporting.unhcr.org/donor-ranking> (accessed 9 Apr. 2022). UNRWA: Compiled by the author from research interview, officials from external relations department, UNRWA, October 2021; UNRWA (2021), '2020 Pledges to UNRWA's Programmes (Cash and In-kind) - Overall Donor Ranking, as 31 December 2020', [https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/overall\\_donor\\_ranking\\_0.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/overall_donor_ranking_0.pdf); UNRWA (2022), '2021 Pledges to UNRWA's Programmes (Cash and In-kind) - Overall Donor Ranking, as 31 December 2021', [https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/overall\\_donor\\_ranking\\_2021.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/overall_donor_ranking_2021.pdf).

Note: In 2020, from Chinese funding, \$2,291,904 supported UNRWA's COVID-19 response.

<sup>26</sup> Liang, S. Y. (2009), 国际难民法 [*International Refugee Law*], Beijing, Intellectual Property Publishing House, p. 254, footnote 1, as cited in, Song, L. (2018), 'China and the International Refugee Protection Regime: Past, Present, and Potentials', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 37(2), pp. 139–161, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdy003>.  
<sup>27</sup> Song (2018), 'China and the International Refugee Protection Regime'.

<sup>28</sup> Research interview, officials from UNHCR representative office in China, August 2021.

UNHCR reports that the organization has built strong partnerships with relevant Chinese government agencies and affiliated institutions.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, UNRWA's relationship with China is at an early stage; the agency has made it a priority to strengthen its relations with emerging donors.<sup>30</sup> Both agencies identified two priorities for their strategic engagement with China: to mobilize sustained increased financial support; and to enlist political support from the Chinese government to secure aid for refugees.

Chinese government funding to UN agencies for refugee relief is administered through a variety of vehicles, including the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDF), the SSCAF, and the newly created China International Development and Cooperation Agency (CIDCA).

### Box 2. Restructuring China's foreign aid institutions

The Chinese government carried out extensive institutional restructuring in 2018, which led to the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management and the CIDCA, China's first foreign aid agency. The restructuring strengthened China's ability to respond to natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies in other countries. Issued jointly by CIDCA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), the latest guidelines clarify the foreign aid competencies and roles of government departments.<sup>31</sup> The CIDCA has overall policy and budgetary responsibility for China's primarily project-based foreign aid programme. The guidelines also identify the different types of CIDCA foreign aid and advise on the possibility of collaboration with other countries, international organizations and non-governmental organizations on foreign aid. Lastly, it is important to note that the CIDCA is relatively new and its capacity and overseas projects remain limited at the time of writing. China does not have significant overseas operating capacity for distributing foreign aid, and therefore UN agencies are primary destinations of Chinese government funding for humanitarian assistance.

At the time of writing, UNHCR is delivering emergency assistance, agreed with CIDCA in late 2020, to provide COVID-19-related personal protective equipment (PPE) to refugees and host communities in Kenya, South Sudan and Tanzania. UNHCR also began work on a CIDCA-funded project to provide emergency shelter, relief items and education support in Afghanistan in 2021.<sup>32</sup> Through the SSCAF, UNHCR implemented six projects from 2017 to 2019 in Angola, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Republic of the Congo and Zimbabwe. These projects contributed to UNHCR's humanitarian assistance programmes including food, shelter, registration, education, health and water and sanitation.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Global Times* (2020), 'China Responsible and Supportive on Refugee Issues: UNHCR Representative', 16 September 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1201128.shtml>.

<sup>30</sup> Research interview, officials from external relations Department, UNRWA, October 2021.

<sup>31</sup> China International Development Cooperation Agency (2021), '对外援助管理办法 [Foreign aid management measures]', [http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2021-08/31/c\\_1211351312.htm](http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2021-08/31/c_1211351312.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Research interview, officials from UNHCR representative office in China, August 2021.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Over the past four years, China has supported UNRWA's emergency food assistance activities in Gaza. More recently in 2020, China provided an in-kind contribution of COVID-19 response supplies, which had an immediate impact on UNRWA's ability to respond to the pandemic,<sup>34</sup> and was referenced by the State Council as an example of China's partaking in easing refugee crises. For the complete list of Chinese government funding to UN agencies that provide refugee relief (from 2012 to 2021), please refer to Annex 1.

## Chinese civil society organizations

CSOs in China also contribute to the country's overseas humanitarian action. Chinese CSOs have extensive domestic experience dealing with humanitarian emergencies from natural disasters. This knowledge and expertise present Chinese CSOs with an opportunity for a greater role in international humanitarian responses.

### **Chinese CSOs have extensive domestic experience dealing with humanitarian emergencies from natural disasters.**

There are a number of recent examples of Chinese CSOs expanding their activities at home and abroad. The Nepal earthquake in April 2015 was a pivotal moment for Chinese CSOs. The earthquake triggered the largest disaster relief operation organized by the Chinese government on foreign soil, with active participation from Chinese CSOs.<sup>35</sup> In addition to providing relief materials, many Chinese organizations deployed aid workers to Nepal and participated extensively in post-disaster reconstruction. According to researcher Lin Peng, there are two reasons for this shift in approach: China's existing economic diplomacy in Nepal; and the Chinese government's history of cooperation with the Nepalese government and UN agencies in the country.<sup>36</sup>

The government-affiliated China Red Cross Foundation provides relief to displaced populations from Myanmar in China's Yunnan and Guansi provinces, drawing from its experience responding to natural disasters.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, overseas, the China Red Cross Foundation provides medical aid in partner countries – an example is the establishment of two mobile hospitals in Syria and Iraq. At the time of writing, the China Red Cross Foundation does not implement projects overseas that focus on refugees, given the topic's political sensitivity and the government's priorities. On the possibility of future overseas activities for refugee relief, an interviewee

<sup>34</sup> Research interview, officials from external relations department, UNRWA, October 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Hirono (2018), 'Exploring the links between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action'.

<sup>36</sup> The Chinese government already had a history of collaboration with Nepal and in 2010 signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations Development Programme under the framework of the SSCAF to co-implement development projects – Nepal was one of the primary beneficiaries of this technical and financial assistance. For further reading, see, Peng, L. (2021), 'Sino-Nepal Cooperation in Disasters: Dynamics and Challenges', in Cook A. D. B. and Gong, L. (2021) (eds), *Humanitarianism in the Asia-Pacific*, Springer Briefs in Political Science, Singapore: Springer, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4874-5\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4874-5_4).

<sup>37</sup> Research interview, official, China Red Cross Foundation, December 2021.

highlighted that the organization would follow the government's position and would need to find an appropriate angle from which to engage on the issue, in order to focus on humanitarianism rather than civil and political issues.<sup>38</sup>

In refugee situations, overseas involvement of Chinese CSOs is indeed more limited, but there are some examples. In a pilot project in 2018, Chinese non-governmental organization (NGO) China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) and US-headquartered Mercy Corps, jointly launched the Bright Future Program in the Palabek Refugee Settlement in Lamwo district of northern Uganda to support urgent needs and the self-reliance of South Sudanese refugees through farming, agriculture and youth-led business.<sup>39</sup> Mercy Corps led the design and setup of the programming and CFPA seconded two officers to the Mercy Corps Uganda team to co-implement activities. Funding came from a Chinese entrepreneur interested in supporting the partnership and conformed to Mercy Corps standards for monitoring and reporting. Trust in the relationship between the two organizations was of key importance for the project's success, with CFPA learning from Mercy Corps in this new issue area.<sup>40</sup> This is a relatively new and innovative form of partnership between international and Chinese NGOs working together and funded by a third party.

However, an interviewee noted that it remains difficult to find donors interested in replicating this model, and this is becoming increasingly challenging due to geopolitical tensions between Western countries and China.<sup>41</sup> An interview with an official at the EU Delegation to China confirmed that rising tensions between China and the EU risked disincentivizing collaboration on international development programming.<sup>42</sup> Financial sustainability has been a consistent challenge for most Chinese NGOs because it is difficult to raise funds and access government funding pools, such as the SSCAF.<sup>43</sup> As the Chinese government broadens its collaboration with UN agencies and foreign governments, there is a risk of overlooking Chinese civil society as an avenue for humanitarian aid. Another interviewee from an international humanitarian organization noted the preliminary need of a robust relationship with the Chinese government, before relationships with other actors in China could grow.<sup>44</sup>

## Comparative regional perspective on humanitarianism

How does China's overseas humanitarian action compare with other regional players in the Asia-Pacific? National governments often play a key role in humanitarian affairs in the region, which faces significant natural disaster

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> China Daily (2018), 'Chinese NGO, Mercy Corps launch refugee project in Uganda', <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201804/12/WS5acef441a3105cdf6517dec.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Research interview, official, Mercy Corps Beijing representative office, July 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Research interview, official from the European Union Delegation to China, June 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Research interview, a Chinese scholar of humanitarian studies, November 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Research interview, officials from external relations department, UNRWA, October 2021.

risks.<sup>45</sup> To situate Chinese engagement within broader trends in the Asia-Pacific, this section considers Japan's leadership in the humanitarian sector and India's history of hosting displaced populations. Asia's three largest economies provide contrasting examples of state-based approaches to humanitarianism and refugee relief.

### Japan's overseas leadership in the humanitarian sector

Japan's diplomatic engagement and financial support for humanitarian responses is well-established, and the provision of overseas development assistance (ODA) has long been a diplomatic tool for the country. Japan continues to be one of the most important partners of UNHCR.<sup>46</sup> The country is also a generous donor towards UNRWA's humanitarian activities.<sup>47</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Japanese government remained a strong supporter, financially and politically, of forcibly displaced people. In fact, the Japanese government and civil society not only maintained, but increased, their financial and political commitments to UNHCR throughout the pandemic.<sup>48</sup> According to an interviewee, awareness and empathy for the plights of forcibly displaced people has increased among Japanese citizens during the pandemic.<sup>49</sup>

Similar to China, the government of Japan often takes a development-centred approach to implementing foreign assistance.<sup>50</sup> The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the governmental body that delivers the bulk of Japan's ODA, engages on refugee issues via well-established partnerships and through the lens of human security and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, in Uganda, JICA is currently engaged in implementing a capacity-building project targeting local governments in refugee-hosting areas; supporting the office of the prime minister by deploying a refugee adviser to provide technical assistance; infrastructure construction; a study on social investment for refugee-related businesses; and livelihood support through rice farming.<sup>51</sup> In discussions for this paper, JICA officials noted that, in their experience in humanitarian responses, successful programming for a development agency depends on strategic coordination with humanitarian actors; a well-designed baseline survey to understand the gaps in assistance; and, given the changing nature of humanitarian contexts, such as a large influx of refugees, progress should be measured through a balanced series of indicators (not overly specific or ambitious).<sup>52</sup> JICA's partnerships and technical expertise allow the organization to work effectively in overseas refugee situations – in line with Japan's traditional role in humanitarian action and diplomacy.

<sup>45</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2019), *The Disaster Riskscape Across Asia-Pacific: Pathways for Resilience, Inclusion and Empowerment*, Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019, New York: United Nations, [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/Asia-Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202019\\_full%20version.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/Asia-Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202019_full%20version.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Research interview, officials from UNHCR representative office in Japan, November 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Research interview, officials from external relations department, UNRWA, September 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Research interview, officials from UNHCR representative office in Japan, November 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> A key text for Japan's development cooperation policy is the Development Cooperation Charter, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2015), 'Cabinet Decision on the Development Cooperation Charter', Government of Japan, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page\\_000138.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page_000138.html).

<sup>51</sup> Research interview, officials from JICA, October 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



Finally, while Japan is a leading humanitarian contributor overseas, the country's domestic treatment of asylum seekers and refugees remains a delicate matter. This is due to issues such as low refugee acceptance rates, immigration detention, and limited – albeit increasing<sup>53</sup> – resettlement opportunities. Leading international engagement on refugee relief, while maintaining restrictive domestic asylum policies, creates a tension that actors engaging with Japan must consider.

Overall, Japan's humanitarian diplomacy provides a useful model to compare with China's more recent action in the sector. Within a strategic post-Second World War rebalancing of its global status, Japan was one of the earliest non-Western and non-Christian states to integrate into the humanitarian sector – through investments in the country's political leadership and technical capacity to work overseas. Unlike China, Japan is a member of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative. Japan is also a key contributor to economic development assistance in refugee situations. From an economic development perspective, JICA's programming on refugee relief is a model that Chinese actors could increasingly adopt, given China's development-oriented approach to refugee relief and its potential cooperation within the UN-led humanitarian–development nexus framework.<sup>54</sup> As China's CIDCA develops, it remains to be seen whether Chinese humanitarian institutions and donor platforms will converge with international mechanisms. Lastly, Japan's international recognition in this space contrasts with the wider perception of China's growing humanitarian engagement, which must contend with increasing high-level geopolitical tensions and varying local-level responses to increased on-the-ground presence of Chinese humanitarian organizations and actors, for example in Belt and Road Initiative partner countries.

### India's history of hosting displaced people

India was once considered an aid-receiving country, but since the early 1990s it has gradually become recognized as an emerging donor. India's assistance to Afghanistan in 2001 and to post-tsunami Sri Lanka in 2006 were turning points for the country's provision of humanitarian aid.<sup>55</sup> On refugee relief, India is an important partner of UNHCR, and the country plays a key role in supporting conflict resolution dialogues and providing development and humanitarian assistance.<sup>56</sup> In recent years, India's development partnerships have expanded to reach low-income countries within and beyond the Asia-Pacific region, through developmental assistance and capacity-building programmes under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC).<sup>57</sup> India has also consistently supported UNRWA's core programme budget over the years with

<sup>53</sup> In 2019, the government of Japan pledged at the UN-led Global Refugee Forum to extend resettlement of refugees in Japan. UNHCR officials reported that while the COVID-19 pandemic halted international travel and refugee resettlement worldwide, interviews for the resettlement of refugees to Japan continued, so resettlement should be able to resume when the COVID-19 pandemic allows for international travel. Research interview, officials from UNHCR representative office in Japan, November 2021.

<sup>54</sup> The humanitarian–development nexus is a UN-promoted model for increased collaboration between organizations working in short-term humanitarian aid and long-term international development promoted since 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Banerjee, P. (2021), 'India's Response to Humanitarianism: A Synopsis', in Cook and Gong (2021) (eds), *Humanitarianism in the Asia-Pacific*.

<sup>56</sup> Research interview, officials from UNHCR representative office in India, January 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

unearmarked funding. Since 2020, the presence of India on UNRWA's Advisory Commission reflects a broader and more diverse donor base, bringing new voices and insights to the agency's high-level consultations with member states.<sup>58</sup>

## **China and India have a history of non-intervention approaches in their foreign policy, which influences their responses to international crises.**

Within its growing overseas engagement, Indian funding and diplomatic activities on refugee issues remain limited, compared to leading actors in the sector. However, these metrics do not capture a country's complete contributions to the plight of the forcibly displaced – particularly outside Western donor countries. India's domestic history of hosting displaced populations is vast and mixed – a patchwork of safe havens and exclusionary policies. India has hosted many displaced populations, for example from Sri Lanka, Tibet and Afghanistan. In other situations, such as the recent influx of Rohingya refugees, human rights groups have drawn attention to cases of forced repatriations.<sup>59</sup> A non-signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, India lacks a formal legal framework on refugees and this enables the government to implement ad hoc policy decisions regarding refugees and displaced people, both domestically and internationally. While China is a signatory to the convention, it also lacks a robust legal framework for domestic and overseas engagement on the issue.

International perceptions of India as an emerging donor are also developing in parallel to China's growing donor activities. Paula Banerjee cautions that colonialism has had a deep impact on Indian foreign policy and, in some cases, created mistrust in international humanitarian interventions.<sup>60</sup> Both China and India have a history of non-intervention approaches in their foreign policy, which influences their responses to international crises. As is the case with China, Indian diplomats in multilateral forums have also underscored India's status as a developing country, and highlighted that the UN must consider the development needs of low- and middle-income countries hosting large numbers of refugees.<sup>61</sup> Finally, India's diverse history on displacement issues is a useful reference for assessing how China's local governments engage in cross-border issues and the extent of China's integration within humanitarian institutions and norms.

Japan's humanitarian diplomacy and India's patchwork of domestic and international responses to displacement provide contrasting examples to contextualize perceptions and expectations of Chinese humanitarianism. Regional comparisons are not exhaustive, given significant differences in national contexts and histories. Nevertheless, they are helpful to discuss the convergences and

<sup>58</sup> Research interview, officials from external relations department, UNRWA, October 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Kamdar, B. (2021), 'India Detains Rohingya Refugees and Plans Deportation', *The Diplomat*, 22 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/india-detains-rohingya-refugees-and-plans-deportation>.

<sup>60</sup> Banerjee (2021), 'India's Response to Humanitarianism: A Synopsis'.

<sup>61</sup> Permanent Mission of India in Geneva (2020), 'Statement by India at the General Debate of the 71st Annual Session of UNHCR Executive Committee (ExCom) [05 to 09 October 2020] delivered by Mr. Animesh Choudhury, First Secretary', <https://www.pmindiaun.gov.in/statements/MjMxOQ>.

divergences of each country's international engagement on refugee relief. Growing international interest in China's overseas activities should also consider broader humanitarian trends in the Asia-Pacific.

## The future of Chinese humanitarian action on refugee relief

China's overseas action to support refugees has grown in terms of donor funding to UN agencies, public statements in multilateral forums, diplomatic engagement, and overseas activities of Chinese civil society. In line with the country's foreign policy approach, China's engagement is development-focused and state-centric, although Chinese non-state actors are advancing some new activities as well.

Chinese government agencies, civil society and private-sector companies have technical expertise in the areas of disaster response, emergency preparedness, rural development, renewable energy, and digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning. This technical expertise can support humanitarian responses, particularly displacement crises linked to climate change. A deeper reciprocal understanding would strengthen relationships between international organizations and Chinese partners that are looking to work together. Options including capacity-building initiatives and joint training should be explored, as has occurred in other sectors such as peacekeeping.

Politically, China has a unique capacity for diplomatic outreach. In addition to its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, China has open diplomatic dialogues with countries such as North Korea, Venezuela and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>62</sup> Practically, China's overseas presence has also grown due to its expanding contributions to UN peacekeeping and the government-led Belt and Road Initiative, particularly in Asia and Africa. UNHCR and UNRWA acknowledge the political role Chinese diplomats can play in humanitarian crises.<sup>63</sup>

Collaboration with the Chinese private sector presents another opportunity – from the rise in corporate social responsibility and philanthropic activities by Chinese companies, to partnerships for the provision of PPE during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Chinese tech giant Alibaba has partnered with the World Food Programme to use machine learning to map hunger.<sup>64</sup> UNHCR also began engaging with the Chinese private sector in a more structured way in 2019, when a private-sector partnerships team was set up within the UNHCR office in Beijing.<sup>65</sup>

Despite these upward trends, Chinese humanitarian action on refugee relief should not be overestimated. Refugee relief is not a priority for Chinese engagement in global governance – compared to other areas such as peacekeeping

<sup>62</sup> Lecture by Dr Courtney Fung, Queen Elizabeth II Academy for Leadership in International Affairs, London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, October 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Research interview, Officials from UNHCR representative office in China, August 2021; Research interview, officials from external relations department, UNRWA, October 2021.

<sup>64</sup> World Food Programme (2019), 'WFP and Alibaba unveil next generation of machine learning technology in the fight against hunger', <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-and-alibaba-unveil-next-generation-machine-learning-technology-fight-against-hunger>.

<sup>65</sup> Research interview, officials from UNHCR representative office in China, August 2021.

and climate change. China's contributions to refugee relief are sporadic and limited in comparison to leading humanitarian donors. The CIDCA remains in the early stages of development, and China's technical training of humanitarian professionals in the public sector is ongoing. Looking ahead, the local reception and public image of Chinese organizations operating abroad is an important soft power consideration, especially in countries receiving aid or collaborating with Chinese organizations.

Additionally, refugees continue to be a highly sensitive topic in Chinese society, which could impact the level of domestic support for Chinese contributions to humanitarian responses. In other countries, some Chinese nationals are also registered with refugee status, which could present further sensitivities. Lastly, rising geopolitical tensions between China and Western countries risk hampering opportunities for international cooperation in the refugee space.

The extent to which Chinese humanitarian action is consistent with key international humanitarian principles is also heavily debated. Humanitarianism scholar Miwa Hirono argues that China's long-established tradition of assistance is based on a set of norms that do not necessarily align with the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence regarded as standard in the conventional humanitarian system.<sup>66</sup> Unlike Japan, China is not part of donor groups such as the OECD DAC or the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative. The lack of policy guidelines and support for operations abroad are also a key obstacle to the formalization of China's overseas humanitarian and development activities.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, China's provision of aid to refugees is not systematic, but often ad hoc and occurs through earmarked funding for specific situations that tend to align with other diplomatic priorities. Transparency and consistency are key for the establishment of partnerships to support displaced populations, from emergency relief and food security, to healthcare provision and education delivery. Hirono recommends increasing national discussions and exchanges with international humanitarian actors on how to create a policy framework or criteria for China's humanitarian action,<sup>68</sup> and this also applies to refugee relief. To establish its overseas humanitarian work, China must translate its increasing high-level commitments into sustainable project partnerships and tangible outcomes.

Finally, as China's engagement in humanitarian crises develops, the humanitarian sector itself is also changing and under pressure due to significant funding gaps, context-specific diplomatic efforts on issues such as humanitarian access, and ongoing widespread challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis. While China becomes more influential, kickstarting debates over whether the country will be a norm-maker or a norm-taker in global affairs, the current humanitarian sector is also evolving. The changing nature and priorities of humanitarian institutions must be considered in conjunction with analysis of China's objectives and engagement.

<sup>66</sup> Hirono (2018), 'Exploring the links between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action'.

<sup>67</sup> Research interview, a Chinese scholar of humanitarian studies, November 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Hirono (2018), 'Exploring the links between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action'.

For example, UN and Chinese officials have referenced the humanitarian–development nexus<sup>69</sup> model as a potential entry point for Chinese engagement and contributions to global refugee issues.<sup>70</sup> Developing countries host 85 per cent of the world's refugees,<sup>71</sup> and over half are displaced for more than four years. Humanitarian responses are increasingly considering the development needs of displaced and host communities, leading to a sectoral push towards multi-year programming that integrates short-term humanitarian interventions, as well as more varied sources of development financing in emergency responses – such as multilateral development banks, development agencies and private companies. China's development-oriented approach to its foreign policy and Chinese organizations' experience in the development sector – particularly in rural settings – present a potential opportunity for closer collaboration with the UN as it focuses on root causes of displacement and solutions to protracted displacement crises in low-income countries.

Nevertheless, clear differences in approach to the humanitarian–development nexus remain. The World Bank maintains the position that economic development is not sufficient to address forced displacement, given context-specific civil, political and security factors.<sup>72</sup> This is at odds with China's position, which argues that economic development is at the root of state instability and conflict, and the country is particularly reluctant to become involved in civil conflicts. Differences in approach to the role of economic development in addressing displacement could preclude long-term collaborations, and will be a key question for how China and the CIDCA's overseas humanitarian portfolios develop in the coming years.

## Conclusion

China's overseas humanitarian action and increased contributions to refugee relief have wider implications for the humanitarian sector. Overall, China's high-level commitments and contributions to refugee relief have gradually increased, with a state-centric approach and a focus on economic development. UN agencies are the primary destination of Chinese government funding for refugees, through vehicles such as the CIDCA and SSCAF within China's growing institutionalization of development cooperation. Overseas activities of Chinese civil society and the private sector are also developing, even though examples of partnerships on refugee issues remain limited.

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<sup>69</sup> Stakeholders at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 identified strengthening collaboration between humanitarian and development programming as a top priority, with the goal to not only meet urgent humanitarian needs, but also reduce risk and vulnerability in the long term. For further reading on the humanitarian–development nexus, please refer to, OCHA (undated), 'Humanitarian Development Nexus – The New Way of Working', <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/humanitarian-development-nexus>.

<sup>70</sup> Tan, V. (2017), 'China can play key role in solving refugee crises - UNHCR chief', UNHCR News, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2017/6/593946b64/china-play-key-role-solving-refugee-crises-unhcr-chief.html>.

<sup>71</sup> UNHCR (2021), 'Refugee Statistics', <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/> (accessed 15 Nov. 2021).

<sup>72</sup> In 2017, the World Bank argued in favour of supporting countries throughout displacement crises – from strengthening resilience and preparedness at the onset to creating lasting solutions. World Bank (2017), 'Forcibly Displaced: Toward a Development Approach Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced, and Their Hosts', Washington DC: World Bank, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/25016>.

China's political role in humanitarian crises is noteworthy given its permanent member status on the UN Security Council, as well as its mixed and disputed track record of diplomatic engagement in displacement crises – such as in Myanmar and Syria. This makes China one of the countries with the most potential to influence the plight of refugees globally. In assessing China's overseas activities, it is useful to consider the broader trends of humanitarian action in the Asia-Pacific. Japan's humanitarian diplomacy and India's domestic and overseas responses to displacement provide contrasting examples to contextualize Chinese humanitarianism.

To support refugee relief projects, Chinese actors will need to translate high-level commitments into tangible outcomes and sustainable partnerships, within a transparent and robust framework for overseas humanitarian action. It would be prudent not to overestimate Chinese engagement on refugee relief: the issue area is sensitive within Chinese society and practical and normative differences with conventional aid remain, such as approaches to the role of economic development in refugee relief. Finally, reciprocal influence and interests permeate China's partnerships and role within the UN system. The extent to which humanitarian organizations and Chinese actors are willing to navigate fundamental differences in approach is key in determining whether international organizations and local communities can successfully collaborate with Chinese partners on displacement.



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## Annex 1. Chinese government donor funding for refugee relief (2012–21)

Table compiled to list Chinese government contributions to UN agencies focused on providing assistance to displaced populations (UNHCR, UNRWA and IOM), as well as to other recipients for projects described to support displaced populations (WFP, WHO, UNICEF and national governments), reported by OCHA's Financial Tracking Service.

OCHA Flow ID	Destination organization	Description	Sector	Amount (\$)	Humanitarian response plan
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2021 for refugee relief</b>					
#238129	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)	Emergency food assistance in Gaza	Food security	1,000,000	
#239198	UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	Partially against Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)	Education	507,774	Afghanistan HRP 2021
#239199	UNHCR	Partially against Afghanistan HRP	Multi-sector	122,066	Afghanistan HRP 2021
#239200	UNHCR	Partially against Afghanistan HRP	Emergency shelter and non-food items (NFI)	1,370,160	Afghanistan HRP 2021
#231682	World Food Programme (WFP)	Unconditional food assistance to Nigerian refugees in 'Minawao site – Far North' (COVID-19)	Food security	2,000,000	Cameroon HRP 2021
#246557	UNHCR	Against Burundi HRP		14,761	Burundi HRP 2021
#247936	UNHCR	Partially against Afghanistan HRP	Emergency shelter and NFI	612,207	Afghanistan HRP 2021
#247937	UNHCR	Partially against Afghanistan HRP		187,793	Afghanistan HRP 2021
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2020 for refugee relief</b>					
#219156	International Organization for Migration (IOM)	Emergency shelter support for displaced persons in Ethiopia (2019–20)	Emergency shelter and NFI	52,790 (cumulative total)	
#218737	World Health Organization (WHO)	Support for WHO response to COVID-19 outbreak – Egypt	Multi-sector	486,270	Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) 2020
#218747	WHO	Support for WHO response to COVID-19 outbreak – Rwanda	Health	1,222,848	Burundi Regional Refugee Response Plan 2020

## China's overseas humanitarian action to assist refugees

OCHA Flow ID	Destination organization	Description	Sector	Amount (\$)	Humanitarian response plan
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2019 for refugee relief</b>					
#217720	IOM	Emergency shelter, camp management support and NFI assistance to conflict-affected population in northeast Nigeria	Emergency shelter and NFI	901,682	
#217721	IOM	Improving displacement management and camp coordination and management in northeast Nigeria	Camp coordination management	147,549	
#218225	UNHCR	Against Bangladesh HRP		400,000	Bangladesh 2020 Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis (January–December)
#219157	IOM	Emergency shelter support for displaced persons in Ethiopia (2019–20)	Emergency shelter and NFI	34,789	
#197219	UNRWA	Emergency food assistance	Food security	1,000,000	
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2018 for refugee relief</b>					
#183482	UNRWA	Emergency food assistance in Gaza	Food security	2,350,000	
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2017 for refugee relief</b>					
#154782	WHO	Addressing health consequences of conflict-affected displaced Syrians and refugees	Multi-sector	100,000	Syria 3RP 2017
#155131	UNHCR	HRP for Afghanistan		1,000,000	Afghanistan HRP 2017
#155807	WFP	Food assistance to refugees and vulnerable populations in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt affected in Syria	Multi-sector	2,000,000	Syria 3RP 2017
#157206	WFP	Emergency food assistance (South Sudan and Somalia refugees) in Kenya	Food security	5,000,000	
#157350	WFP	Building resilience, protecting livelihoods and reducing malnutrition of refugees, returnees and other vulnerable people (Chad)		786,692	
#159611	WHO	Addressing health consequences of conflict-affected displaced Syrians and refugees	Multi-sector	75,000	Syria 3RP 2017

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OCHA Flow ID	Destination organization	Description	Sector	Amount (\$)	Humanitarian response plan
#159612	WHO	Addressing health consequences of conflict-affected displaced Syrians and refugees	Multi-sector	75,000	Syria 3RP 2017
#159613	WHO	Addressing health consequences of conflict-affected displaced Syrians and refugees	Multi-sector	100,000	Syria 3RP 2017
#159614	WHO	Addressing health consequences of conflict-affected displaced Syrians and refugees	Multi-sector	150,000	Syria 3RP 2017
#159650	United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)	Lebanon: Assisting Syrian refugee children in Lebanon	Multi-sector	1,000,000	Syria 3RP 2017
#162390	IOM	Provision of emergency shelter to displaced populations	Emergency shelter and NFI	1,000,000	
#164321	WFP	Food and nutrition assistance to vulnerable returnees and refugees in eastern Afghanistan and people displaced by conflict	Food security	1,000,000	
#164451	Myanmar Red Cross Society	Rohingya support in Rakhine		220,588	
#165008	Bangladesh, Government of	150 tonnes of goods, including 2,000 tents and 3,000 blankets, to refugees in Bangladesh		In-kind	
#165012	UNHCR	Partially against 2017 Iraq HRP		801,308	Iraq HRP 2017
#165361	WFP	Assistance to refugees (Ethiopia)	Food security	500,000	
#165362	WFP	Assistance to refugees (Ethiopia)	Food security	2,500,000	
#165588	WFP	Assistance to displaced people (Republic of Congo)	Food security	3,000,000	
#168218	UNHCR	2017 HRP for Congo		1,000,001	Republic of Congo HRP 2017
#168530	UNHCR	Partially against 2017 Iraq HRP		34,025	Iraq HRP 2017
#161854	WFP	Critical support to populations affected by the ongoing crisis in Central African Republic and its regional impact (Cameroon)		1,000,000	Cameroon 2017
#170475	WFP	Providing life-saving support to households in Cameroon, Chad and Niger directly affected by insecurity in northern Nigeria (Niger state)		1,000,000	Niger 2017

## China's overseas humanitarian action to assist refugees

OCHA Flow ID	Destination organization	Description	Sector	Amount (\$)	Humanitarian response plan
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2016 for refugee relief</b>					
#147433	UNHCR	Iraq, within Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)	Multi-sector	2,000,000	Syria 3RP 2016
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2015 for refugee relief</b>					
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2014 for refugee relief</b>					
#112873	WHO	Supporting Lebanon's health system to cope with the Syria crisis	Multi-sector	600,000	Syria 3RP 2014
#112691	Syrian Arab Republic – in-kind contribution	Provide humanitarian aid – relief consist of blankets and quilts for internally displaced Syrians who are battling the harsh winter.		3,300,000	
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2013 for refugee relief</b>					
#101946	UNHCR	Humanitarian assistance to Syria Crisis (Turkey)	Multi-sector	1,000,000	Syria Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) 2013
#101987	IOM	Humanitarian assistance to Syria Crisis (Jordan)	Multi-sector	200,000	Syria RRP 2013
<b>Chinese government donor funding in 2012 for refugee relief</b>					
#97525 and #97526	Jordan, Government of, and Lebanon, Government of	Emergency humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon		2,351,466	
#99620	WFP	Emergency food assistance to newly displaced people in North Kivu and spillover into South Kivu (Kalehe and Kabare territories)	Food security	1,000,000	Democratic Republic of the Congo 2012

Source: Compiled by the author from Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2021), 'Humanitarian Aid Contributions – China, Government', <https://fts.unocha.org/donors/2976/flows/2020> (accessed 15 Apr. 2022).

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Cover image: Rohingya refugees walk towards refugee camps in the Bangladeshi district of Teknaf, 7 November 2017.

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