



HPG Report

# Humanitarian action and foreign policy

## Balancing interests and values

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# Acronyms

<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of South-East Asian Nations
<b>BPRM</b>	Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>CISAR</b>	China International Search and Rescue
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>DoD</b>	Department of Defense
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FTS</b>	Financial Tracking Service
<b>GHD</b>	Good Humanitarian Donorship
<b>HPG</b>	Humanitarian Policy Group
<b>ICAI</b>	Independent Commission on Aid Impact
<b>IDC</b>	International Development Committee
<b>MFA</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<b>MINUSTAH</b>	United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti
<b>MOFCOM</b>	Ministry of Commerce
<b>NAO</b>	National Audit Office
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>OCHA</b>	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>OFDA</b>	Office for Disaster Assistance
<b>PAC</b>	Public Accounts Committee



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# 1 Introduction

Humanitarian action by its nature often operates in politically charged situations, and there are often tensions between delivering assistance according to the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, and understanding and responding to the political realities of crises that strongly influence how, what and where humanitarian action takes place. The politics around assistance include whether a crisis is a priority for world powers and donors in the first place, and the interests and actions of an array of players on the ground, including governments, non-state groups and affected communities themselves. This paper, the final outcome of a two-year HPG research project on the relationship between state foreign policy and humanitarian action, looks at how the role governments play in responding to crises in other countries is influenced by a wider set of foreign policy drivers than the humanitarian imperative alone.<sup>1</sup>

Actors within the humanitarian system often attribute the way governments engage (or not) with humanitarian problems to the degree of political will, or the importance governments place on humanitarian needs against other interests, including national security, trade and public opinion. This is certainly part of the story – humanitarian needs are clearly not the only consideration in the continuing tragedy of the Syria conflict, for instance, and humanitarian (and development) assistance played a key role in the international strategies of both sides during the Cold War, and in the stabilisation and counter-terrorism strategies pursued by Western governments in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. But simply bemoaning the fact that the decisions important global states take about their positions on crises such as Syria and Afghanistan may not always put the humanitarian imperative first does little to advance understanding of the very complex calculations driving these states' foreign policies. Humanitarian objectives are part of this debate, but they are just one of many considerations confronting policy-makers dealing with complex crises.

Foreign policy interests other than humanitarian action are most often seen as detrimental to principled

humanitarian action because they prioritise security or trade over saving lives, but there is a more subtle and complex relationship in which states' interests and values interact over time, and depending on context. Can aid be both principled and in the national interest? Are humanitarian values under greater threat today than they were in the past? This paper discusses the various factors that drive decisions about how humanitarian aid allocations are decided. It argues that being better attuned to these dynamics, and how they vary according to the particular crisis and the particular government concerned, presents an opportunity for humanitarian actors to engage in a more politically nuanced way with those governments. This applies as much to so-called 'rising' donor governments such as China and Saudi Arabia as it does to major established donors such as the UK and the US.

## 1.1 The changing foreign policy environment

Despite aspirations to neutrality and independence as foundational principles of humanitarian action, humanitarian interventions necessarily exist within and form part of a broader geopolitical context, alongside other instruments of statecraft, including trade, foreign policy and armed force. Since the end of the Cold War, that geopolitical environment has undergone significant change. States that for decades were at the margins of an international order dominated by the West are now competitors in the struggle for economic, political and military power. China's rise as a global power over the past decade, and Russia's re-emergence as a strategic player in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, are clear examples of how the global configuration of power is changing. Since 2011 in particular, complex international crises, including the Arab Spring, the Syria conflict, the global financial crisis and the reassertion of Cold War tensions between Russia and the West, have all provided opportunities for states in the Global South to assert themselves as significant actors in, and in some cases leaders of, the international response. As Amar (2012: 2) puts it, over the past decade the world has seen

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<sup>1</sup> The humanitarian imperative is the right to receive and give humanitarian assistance, expanding the principle of humanity, the first of the seven Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality (IFRS, n.d.).

‘extraordinary shifts in patterns of globalization and international security’. In effect, power is shifting from West to East, and from North to South.

These geopolitical shifts are beginning to be felt in the structures and systems of international humanitarian response. While the humanitarian impulse is common across cultures and time, the formal organisations and legal instruments governing international humanitarian assistance are Western constructs created in the years after the Second World War. As political, economic and military power shifts away from the Western world, so ‘new’, or at least newly recognised, actors are becoming more prominent in humanitarian response. States such as China and Turkey, regional organisations including the African Union (AU) and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and diaspora and religious networks are all beginning to play a much larger role in an area of international relations long dominated by the Western states of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). National governments too are increasingly taking charge of responses to disasters on their own soil, suggesting that the traditional role of major Western donors and aid organisations is no longer routinely accepted. The multilateral structures that have governed and structured international politics and the humanitarian system for decades are also under strain, including by states instrumental in establishing them in the first place.

These trends are certainly neither inevitable nor inexorable: in the Gulf, for instance, the initial surge of aid funding in response to emerging crises in the Middle East and North Africa has not been sustained, and by 2017 the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the two largest Gulf donors, had dropped out of the list of the largest ten contributors of international humanitarian assistance (Knox-Clarke, 2018). It is also easy to overstate the ‘declining West’ narrative when Western Europe and North America still dominate so many areas of international life, including the policy discourse around and funding of humanitarian assistance. Even so, the sands are undeniably shifting.

## 1.2 Taking a foreign policy lens: a conceptual framework of values and interests

What do these shifts mean for humanitarian action? Using a foreign policy lens roots our understanding of government behaviour in the wider framework of global geopolitics, state relations and power, and the

balance between values and interests in the foreign policy of states. Foreign policy can be defined as a state’s approach to its interactions with the wider international system: other states, organisations such as the United Nations or non-state actors such as international corporations, armed rebel groups or civil society movements.

Theories of international relations provide frameworks for understanding the forces shaping and driving foreign policy. The dominant schools of thought are realist and liberal. The realist school prioritises power politics; the liberal school places greater emphasis on the potential for cooperation and progress – both material and moral (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016; Walt, 2016). For realists, competition between states is inevitable given that each is in pursuit of its own national interests (Korab-Karpowicz, 2013). In the words of Stephen M. Walt of Harvard University, ‘Realism sees power as the centerpiece of political life and sees states as primarily concerned with ensuring their own security in a world where there’s no world government to protect them from others’. Walt argues that ‘Realists believe nationalism and other local identities are powerful and enduring; states are mostly selfish; altruism is rare; trust is hard to come by; and norms and institutions have a limited impact on what powerful states do’ (Walt, 2016). Realists are generally sceptical about humanitarian action because they emphasise a state’s interests and quest for power as core to its relations with other states (although humanitarian action can also be a source of power and influence). In contrast, the liberal school considers ethics and values, such as individual liberty, as drivers of international cooperation and conflict mitigation. Liberals see international relations as being conducted within a community of states that, as well as competing with each other, can also collaborate on issues such as trade and human rights (Weber, 2005).

These two schools of thought reflect a neat dichotomy that in practice is much more complex. Humanitarian action is a dimension of foreign policy, and the values that drive it sometimes align with other national interests, and sometimes conflict with them. While there is a widely held view among humanitarians that foreign policy interests have always had an adverse influence on humanitarian action, other interests can be neutral or beneficial to humanitarian engagement, rather than opposed to it – and vice versa. For China, for example, trade interests are commonly held up as a primary mover in its assistance policies, but solidarity with the Global South and a sense of moral obligation are also important factors in its foreign policy engagement and, in turn, its involvement in and



funding of humanitarian response (Hirono, 2018). The UK's contributions to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are another example where a simple assumption that interests always trump values, or that humanitarian engagement is necessarily driven by a desire to advance other elements of a state's international agenda, may not reflect a more complex and nuanced reality. While the DRC appears in the list of the top ten UK humanitarian responses every year from 2008 to 2015, British engagement in the crisis there derives primarily from humanitarian imperatives given the very limited political, strategic or economic interests the country has there (Drummond et al., 2017). The relationship between humanitarian values and interests is also not fixed, but context-specific, multi-layered and non-linear. Likewise, the meaning, interpretation and relevance of values can change. Our research shows that these terms resonate differently in different parts of the world, from one context and culture to another. Interests are also not a single unit of analysis; they are constantly shifting as global power dynamics change.

### 1.3 Donorship and beyond

State humanitarian action encapsulates both a narrow sense of government donorship and higher-level relationships between states. Donorship includes providing financial and material contributions either directly to other governments (bilaterally),

multilaterally (through contributions to the UN system or other multilateral organisations (including regional and sub-regional entities)) or via non-governmental channels (Red Cross/non-governmental organisations (NGOs)), or by direct delivery (e.g. through deployment of medical or military personnel). Based on case studies of China, Saudi Arabia and the UK (Drummond et al., 2017; El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017; Hirono, 2018), this paper focuses both on governments as donors (giving contributions to other governments or via other channels such as the Red Cross, UN and NGOs), and in the wider sense of states as entities with relationships linked to territorial sovereignty, history and identity. It examines the implications of the tensions between aid and foreign policy for international cooperation among donors, as well as between donors and the humanitarian community, and explores the opportunities and challenges facing the humanitarian sector in its engagement with state donors, in particular in responses to conflict. A common denominator in all three case studies is the tension between a state's values as articulated in its humanitarian action, and a multiplicity of other interests – political, economic, diplomatic or military – that may be antithetical, in form and substance, to those values. How can the humanitarian community be better prepared to address these contradictions and trade-offs? What tools are available within the international system to address these tensions and ensure that values are not always superseded by interests, or simply ignored?



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# 2 Interests, values and humanitarian decision-making

The dichotomy between interests and values as drivers of foreign policy is analytically useful, but also simplifies the complex realities of countries and crises. For all states, foreign policy including humanitarian action is driven by a combination of values and interests. It should be self-evident but bears noting that values and interests are not uniform across states. The particular nature of each crisis and wider considerations specific to each government will determine where humanitarian action is positioned among and in relation to other priorities. Humanitarian action can be both an end in itself, and co-opted for other priorities. There are a number of drivers and incentives for state donors to engage in humanitarian response, reflecting both interests and values to varying extents.

## 2.1 Moral obligation

While there has been a shift towards a more realist foreign policy rhetoric, values still underpin much of what drives humanitarian action. The idea that there is a moral obligation to provide humanitarian support is an important impulse behind state action, at least rhetorically. These values can be sustained through humanitarian principles or religious conviction, or based on ‘South–South’ solidarity, as in the case of China, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf donors. These states emphasise a shared history with the under-developed economies of the post-colonial world. This solidarity is reflected in patterns of aid allocation, with 62% of all Gulf aid going to countries in the Arab world in the 40 years from 1970. Gulf aid also supported post-war reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017).

Saudi humanitarianism is closely tied to precepts of Islamic charity and the Arab culture of giving, and more specifically to the country’s position as the ‘cradle of Islam’ and its role as the custodian of the two holy mosques. For its part, as Krebs

(2014: 4) explains, Confucian ideas of responsibility founded on benevolence and morality ‘embedded in ancient Chinese society not only governed familial and interpersonal relations, but also formed the foundation of the imperial government by laying the basis for state responsibility and legitimacy’. China links assistance to the idea of the ‘communitarian ethic of obligation’, which sees one’s ethical obligations as expanding in concentric circles. This means that China’s responsibility is first and foremost to its own people, next to people in the Asia-Pacific, and finally to Africa and Latin America (Hirono et al., 2012: 5).

More established donors too lay claim to a moral imperative in the provision of humanitarian assistance. At least in policy and institutional terms (with the establishment of the Department for International Development (DFID) as a separate government department in 1997), if not always in practice, the UK explicitly distances its humanitarian values and decision-making from other areas of national interest: ‘our humanitarian action will be based on need and need alone’, and ‘we will maintain a principled, non-politicised approach to humanitarian aid’ (UK Government, 2011: 5, 14). Writing in 2017, Secretary of State for International Development Penny Mordaunt pointed to the importance of values in driving the UK’s humanitarian aid: ‘We are big-hearted, open-minded and far-sighted – qualities that define a great nation’ (Mordaunt, 2017); speaking at the 2018 BOND conference, Mordaunt noted that ‘We cannot separate the aid this nation gives from the values this nation has’.

## 2.2 Image and legitimacy

A recent study on why states become donors (Gulrajani and Swiss, 2017: 14) argues that ‘legitimacy as a donor is of strategic interest to states seeking economic and political influence in global

fora'. This is evident in the case study countries. For Saudi Arabia, humanitarian engagement bolsters its self-image as a benevolent nation within the international arena and its role as a self-defined 'Kingdom of humanity' – an imperative made more urgent by the criticism the country has faced on account of its active involvement in the civil war in Yemen. The country has also taken steps to develop partnerships with international organisations, and has brought in international expertise to staff the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre. Regional, bilateral and multilateral humanitarian organisations have fed into its humanitarian strategies, and representatives from Gulf, UN, British and US agencies all have offices in the Centre's premises in Riyadh (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017).

China established the China International Search and Rescue (CISAR) team in April 2001. Its first mission was in response to the Algerian earthquake in May 2003, and it has subsequently been deployed to Iran, Pakistan, Aceh, Yogyakarta, Haiti, New Zealand, Japan and Nepal. One of the key reasons for establishing and deploying the team is to present China as a 'responsible great power': according to one senior Chinese official, the CISAR 'established our country's good image as a responsible state even further' (Hirono, 2018: 12). China has also bent its 'One China' policy by extending assistance to Haiti, a country that recognises Taiwan as a sovereign state, and has modified its foreign aid legislation to allow for assistance to countries without diplomatic relations with Beijing, thereby 'presenting itself as sufficiently benevolent to provide assistance in an emergency (and in the process encouraging host states to switch their diplomatic allegiance to Beijing)' (Hirono, 2018: 12). China has sought to integrate into international institutions and norms, albeit with a focus on strictly technical aspects of disaster response, rather than more politically contentious issues around conflict, though it has engaged in some diplomatic efforts to address conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Afghanistan (ibid.).

## 2.3 Interests first?

While values and image are important, realist, hard power drivers tend to crowd out values most acutely in relation to national security interests. The national/domestic security dimension of aid and state engagement in humanitarian action frequently surfaces in policies and in the language used by politicians to account for their spending on overseas aid, for instance when then UK Prime

Minister David Cameron referred to humanitarian aid as 'an integral pillar of [UK] strategy to combat the rise of the Islamic State across the Middle East' (Cameron, cited in Drummond et al., 2017). The UK's humanitarian aid spending is justified in part by linking it to national security, and the 2015 UK aid strategy explicitly links British aid to the national interest (Drummond et al., 2017). Likewise, then Foreign Secretary William Hague's claim in 2013 that the UK's foreign policy is 'inseparable from upholding human rights, protecting lives and supporting international law', while rhetorically powerful, is in contradiction to aspects of British foreign policy that are held to be actively detrimental to these objectives, notably the government's strong support for arms exports, including to states implicated in violations of International Humanitarian Law, as in the case of Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Yemen conflict (Hague, cited in Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2015).

In the context of Brexit, UK Prime Minister Theresa May has positioned aid to developing countries and countries affected by humanitarian crises as part of Britain's soft power and the post-Brexit concept of 'Global Britain'. May sees Britain's role as an aid provider as core to its 'moral standing' as a nation with an active role in the world, but also acknowledges that it 'is not all about charity, of course', and that 'build[ing] a safer, healthier, more prosperous world for people in developing countries ... makes our own country and people safer and better off too' (DFID, 2017). This link between domestic security and aid policy has been particularly evident around migration, where 'UK policy has been to focus on keeping refugees in their region, in part because the cost of supporting them is significantly lower in neighbouring countries than in the UK' (Drummond et al., 2017: 15). While the main focus has been on the Syrian refugee crisis, the UK's commitment of €3 million to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa has been seen as 'supporting regimes including Sudan and Eritrea in order to keep refugees out of Europe' (ibid.).

Realpolitik concerns for domestic and regional stability are also important drivers of Saudi giving, in particular as a way of countering the influence of Iran and its proxies in the region through the provision of assistance to Saudi Arabia's 'Arab and Muslim brothers during calamities and disasters' (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017: 13). Turkey too sees its role as a humanitarian donor as a key element in its strategy to support regional stability, promote its ambitions for European Union (EU) accession and bolster its position as a regional and global power (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2015). Similar motives underpin Brazil's

aid giving; as one analyst puts it, Brazil's approach to humanitarian assistance is driven by its 'desire to strengthen its regional leadership in Latin America and to increase dialogue with other world regions' (Binder et al., 2010: 10, cited in Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2015). Brazil was a prominent donor to the 2010 Haiti earthquake response, providing almost \$30 million in humanitarian assistance and co-chairing the donor conference with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Brazilian troops comprised the largest national contingent in the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) peacekeeping force (ibid.).

In the US, where the politicisation of assistance is perhaps most firmly entrenched, Halperin and Michel (2000: 8) argue that 'the line separating the USG humanitarian stake from our other key foreign policy goals has been erased: these issues have become deeply embedded in one another'. Members of Congress have raised concerns over whether the provision of humanitarian aid is generating sufficient 'political benefit', and have suggested that US relief supplies to Syria should be more explicitly branded as a message of solidarity with the Syrian people (Margesson, 2013). Unlike May, who regards aid as a useful post-Brexit instrument of UK influence, US President Donald Trump sees it as a waste of taxpayers' money, and has proposed slashing foreign aid to protect the US national interest and direct more investment to military spending (Harris et al., 2017). As one analyst puts it: 'Trump hasn't the slightest objection to being perceived as a bully, but he doesn't want to be ripped off. Thus, he says, he'd be willing to stop buying oil from the Saudis if they don't get serious about fighting the Islamic State ... and discard America's traditional alliance partners – from NATO to the Pacific – if they won't pull their own weight' (Brooks, 2016).

Trade and economic interests constitute another set of key drivers, though the relationship here is less clearly delineated. For the UK, the issue is less that aid is deployed as a way of boosting trade, though post-Brexit concerns will clearly play a role in UK government thinking about the connections between aid policy and economic and trade strategy as the UK leaves the EU, and more that trade and export interests risk undermining the country's stated commitment to humanitarian values, particularly around the vexed question of arms exports and how these weapons are used. This issue has come into sharp focus in relation to the UK's arms trade with Saudi Arabia in the context of Saudi involvement in the Yemeni civil war. The UK is Saudi Arabia's second-largest arms supplier, accounting for a third of purchases, and the arms

trade in general is a major part of the UK economy (Drummond et al., 2017). At the same time, the UK is one of the largest donors in Yemen, providing \$120 million in 2018–19 to a humanitarian crisis that has involved Saudi airstrikes against civilians that the UN believes may amount to war crimes.

Human rights groups have documented bomb attacks on hospitals and other civilian infrastructure, as well as indiscriminate attacks killing and injuring civilians (Amnesty International, 2015). According to a parliamentary inquiry into UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia, 'it seems inevitable that any violations of international humanitarian and human rights law [by the Saudi-led coalition] have involved arms supplied from the UK' (Drummond, et al., 2017: 16). In December 2015, a joint opinion from prominent legal experts concluded that the UK was in breach of its obligations under domestic, European and international law for its authorisation of sales of arms used in the conflict in Yemen (ibid.). Concerns have also been raised about the use of UK-supplied arms by the Israeli military in the occupied Palestinian territory. The UK Working Group on Arms holds that 'previous [UK] government investigations have concluded that components of UK origin have almost certainly been used in previous armed attacks by the Israeli military in Gaza' (ibid.).

Concerns around the influence of trade and commercial interests in China's humanitarian policy have focused on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Beijing's growing interest in resource exploitation, notably in Africa. With regard to the BRI, a transcontinental infrastructure project connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, there are some signs that aid decisions are being influenced by a desire to protect Chinese investment in, and show goodwill towards, states within the BRI area, with the Chinese Red Cross seeking to establish stronger ties with BRI countries outside of bilateral aid channels (Hirono, 2018).

Less clear is the extent to which humanitarian aid decisions are linked to a desire to deepen relations with resource-rich countries that could potentially contribute to Chinese economic growth. Under the 'Going Out' strategy, promulgated by President Jiang Zemin in the late 1990s, Chinese commercial engagement has increased in the Global South, including in countries in regions affected by conflict and disaster, but as Hirono (2018: 20) explains: 'contrary to common assumptions, China's humanitarian aid does not necessarily go to resource-rich countries ... implying that its humanitarian provision is not necessarily determined by the extent of natural resources in destination countries'. While



commerce and trade are key foreign policy priorities for Beijing, as they are for any government, they are ‘only *indirectly* relevant to China’s provision of humanitarian aid, in the sense that good bilateral relations, which humanitarian aid is meant to contribute to, might be ultimately conducive to an environment where China can expand its economic activities in the future’ (ibid.: 21).

The tension and interplay between values and interests, and between rhetorical commitments

and the on the ground reality of the relationship between aid and foreign policy, is multidimensional. Whether it is the predominance of national security and economic interests over issues related to humanitarian concerns in some contexts, DAC and non-DAC countries alike demonstrate flexibility and pragmatism in how they operationalise and create narratives around their foreign policy and aid decisions and priorities. This means that predicting how countries will act – and to which levers they will respond – can be very difficult.

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# 3 Decision-making and governance structures

Predicting how values and interests will interact under any given set of conditions is made more difficult by the wide range of decision-making and governance structures and processes governments use. Finding fixed points in this debate is also complicated by the different definitions different jurisdictions and cultures place on what constitutes ‘humanitarian assistance’. All of these variables affect the extent to which donor states may or may not manage the inherent tensions between values and interests in their aid decisions.

## 3.1 Defining humanitarian assistance

Western donors that are part of the OECD DAC generally follow the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) definition of humanitarian action:

*Humanitarian action includes the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods.*

This definition of humanitarian assistance, which includes more inherently political components such as protection and more longer-term developmental objectives to do with livelihoods beyond simple survival, is set against the more restrictive definition used in official Chinese discourse, which uses the term ‘emergency humanitarian aid’ to mean ‘the short-term provision of food, goods, materials and personnel in times of emergency outside of China’ (Hirono, 2018: 3). The term has a complicated political and ideological lineage: as Hirono (ibid., citing Hirono, 2013a: S208) explains: ‘In the early communist period (1949–1979), “humanitarianism” was regarded “as a tool of the bourgeoisie” or in the service of European and US “imperialists” attempting to “cover up capitalism’s merciless exploitation and

oppression ... and to deceive the proletariat and the working people”’.

While the term has lost some of its ideological baggage, the communist legacy remains in the background. Along with China’s long-standing commitment to national sovereignty and the integrity of a state’s writ across its territory, including in times of crisis, this goes some way to explaining China’s preference for disaster relief, and its reluctance to engage in crises caused by conflict or political upheaval. On an objective level, Chinese policy-makers are also less experienced in the complexities of political crises and more familiar with the technical demands of natural hazard-related responses given the prevalence of hazard-related disasters domestically, though this may be changing as the BRI brings Chinese interests into closer proximity with politically unstable regions.

In the Arab world, humanitarian and development work are interconnected, and Saudi and Gulf donors do not subscribe to Western definitions that distinguish one from the other. They also emphasise infrastructure development as core to their humanitarian and development strategies. This is an overall Gulf trend, whereby over half of reported Gulf Arab lending is directed to building infrastructure. According to the World Bank, this aid is largely channelled to the social and agricultural sectors. Saudi Arabia, for example, is the world’s largest contributor to the Palestinian Authority, and ‘the Palestinian cause has been and still is Saudi foreign policy’s central and dominant issue’ (Saudi Ministry of Interior, 2011, cited in El-Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017).

Another difficulty in comparative analysis between different donors concerns the lack of, and variations in, available data on sources of funding, the channels through which funds are allocated and the beneficiaries targeted. While DAC donors are committed to sharing data with the public, this is not the case in other countries. OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service (FTS) records contributions made by China

in the form of food, shelter, non-food items, health and coordination and support services, but it does not record other contributions to sectors such as rule of law, economic recovery and water and sanitation (Hirono, 2018). Likewise, while official figures on Saudi funding are available through the FTS, this does not include funds allocated through the royal family or funding not in the public domain. Saudi philanthropy ‘has largely been ad hoc, informed by religious and charitable impulses rather than any long-term vision’. Interviews for the Saudi study pointed to an emerging ‘hybrid’ model, with two broad funding approaches: ‘one (reported) injected through international humanitarian actors, and the second (invisible) channelled directly to local civil society organisations and actors on the ground in recipient countries’ (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017: 6).

In terms of funding channels, it is difficult to identify patterns of donor behaviour (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2015), though it does seem clear that non-DAC donors lean more towards bilateral assistance ‘as a vehicle to signal strategic interests, while multilateral and in-kind transfers are chosen to control for misuse in badly governed recipient countries’ (Raschky and Schwindt, 2009: 1). There is good evidence that non-DAC donors have a preference for bilateral rather than multilateral funding, both for development and humanitarian assistance, possibly because of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference that underpin the foreign policy philosophy of states such as China, or a lack of faith in multilateral mechanisms deemed to be dominated by the major Western states (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2015). It is also the case that bilateral funding tends to be more visibly linked to the donor providing it than funds moving through multilateral channels.

In China’s case, the majority of funding goes bilaterally to recipient states (85% in 2015), perhaps because ‘unlike multilateral channels, it makes it easier for China to direct its funds independently of wider multilateral processes and global funding trends, giving it more direct control over where funding is allocated’ (Hirono, 2018: 19). Saudi Arabia also tends to prefer bilateral channels, though the country is also a generous donor to the UN and the multilateral system, and in 2015 funds injected multilaterally exceeded those going through bilateral channels (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017). For its part, the UK channelled over half of its humanitarian funding through UN agencies, and almost a fifth through pooled funds, which offer a more flexible funding modality (Drummond et al., 2017).

## 3.2 Decision-making structures and processes

Institutions with responsibility for or influence on humanitarian action in different countries manage processes of decision-making in varying ways and with different characteristics – including how they balance interests and values. To some extent, the transparency and accountability with which aid policy is developed and implemented, and the extent to which it is insulated or not from wider foreign policy concerns, reflects the wider political culture. In the (opaque) Chinese system, for instance, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sets the general strategic direction of policy, while ‘most day-to-day administration on humanitarian action is made by the state rather than by the party’ (Hirono, 2018: 24). There appears to be no policy framework on humanitarian aid, meaning that a ‘substantial part of the decision-making about details of humanitarian aid is the province of various ministries and organisations’, notably the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) (Hirono, 2018: 24).

The primary involvement of the government departments concerned with trade and foreign policy in the machinery of Chinese humanitarian assistance would imply that assistance is subordinate to these imperatives, but the complexity of policy formulation within the Chinese system makes any simple assumptions hazardous: ‘China’s foreign policy formation and implementation involve not only government agencies but also a wide range of other actors, including businesses across a range of sectors, academic institutions and various civil society actors, many of which house quasi-governmental officials. These actors’ policies and interests are rarely coordinated, and therefore could appear, or even be, contradictory, even antithetical to China’s foreign policy interests’ (Hirono, 2018: 5). As Varrall (2016: 39) explains: ‘an analysis of institutional structures in Chinese foreign aid demonstrates that rather than it following any single, top-down strategic direction, there is little to no overarching guidance beyond general principles’. As a result, multiple Chinese actors engaging in foreign aid develop policies and act in ways that are perceived as inconsistent with other actors. In practice, MOFCOM is largely focused on commercial issues and has little to no interest in diplomatic affairs, while the MFA is responsible for diplomatic affairs and is interested in commercial concerns only insofar as they have a political impact.

While one of the remits of the new International Development Cooperation Agency, established in March 2018, is to ‘strengthen the strategic design of overseas aid’, it is too early to say exactly how this will be implemented (Xinhuanet, 2018), and it is possible that aid decisions will continue to be influenced by the multiplicity of actors that contribute to the formulation of foreign policy and the foreign aid agenda. ‘Vagueness of policy direction from higher levels enhances the space for the multiple actors engaged in China’s overseas assistance to interpret directives according to their own agendas and mandates’ (Corkin 2011: 63), and influential individuals across the whole scope of aid policy and implementation ‘play a key role in decision-making that is not reflected in official flowcharts, at times outside the formal processes’ (Varrall, 2016: 23).

In the UK, humanitarian action is guided by overarching government policy and a coordination structure bringing together a range of ministries and departments under the National Security Council, including DFID, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. There are also cross-government structures to support the UK’s humanitarian action in specific areas. Priorities are also influenced by the level of parliamentary and media interest and lobbying by British NGOs. Government ministers make most humanitarian spending decisions. Except for the most urgent rapid-onset responses, decisions are justified in publicly available business cases, often covering multiple years. Business cases set out the results that are expected, and usually compare alternative routes for achieving them. All allocations are subject to annual monitoring and are scored according to whether they are achieving their objectives (the OECD has praised this practice and suggested that other donors follow DFID’s model). Development and humanitarian aid spending is subject to scrutiny through the National Audit Office (NAO), which reports to Parliament’s Public Accounts Committee (PAC). Separately, the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) reports on all departments’ aid spending to the International Development Committee (IDC). Both parliamentary committees have the power to call ministers and officials to give evidence, and all reports are published (Drummond et al., 2017).

Aid structures in the US are complex, with a large number of government bodies responsible for the allocation and delivery of humanitarian aid. USAID is the principal department in this regard, while the State Department, within which USAID sits, also hosts the Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM). USAID, and its constituent bodies, the Office

for Disaster Assistance (OFDA), Food for Peace, the Office for Civil–Military Cooperation and the Office of Transitional Initiatives, are staffed by aid professionals, but the fact that USAID is part of the State Department means that it is institutionally a component of the US Government’s foreign policy machinery. The Department of Defense (DoD) also has statutory responsibilities for the provision of American aid, including relief supplies, logistics, search and rescue, medical support and refugee assistance (Margesson, 2013). Such assistance has to meet certain criteria, including that it promotes ‘the security interests of the US and the country in which the activities are to be carried out’ (ibid.: 9).

While Saudi Arabia has taken steps to formalise its governance and policy structures around humanitarian assistance and move towards more Western models of giving, notably with the establishment of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, governance structures and policy frameworks remain weak. Structurally, the humanitarian sector is made up of a ‘web of ministries, primarily the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and foundations; there are no checks and balances, decision-making and reporting mechanisms are unclear and mandates overlap’ (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017: 6). Research for the Saudi study failed to clarify the governance system for aid institutions: the King Salman Centre does not have a clear governance structure; its staff reportedly lack expertise and knowledge of humanitarian action; and an over-reliance on international staff seems to be blocking the development of sustainable humanitarian structures and expertise (ibid.).

There are few common threads in terms of specific structures among the countries considered as part of this study. Rather, they illustrate different solutions that have evolved in response to specific events, cultures and political traditions, as well as historical contingencies. No ideal donor model emerges; instead, placing particular approaches and solutions within their wider foreign policy context helps in understanding how humanitarian action is understood, undertaken and prioritised in each country. Counter to popular narratives, it is not the case that DAC donors are value-driven and emerging donors interest-driven. The case studies provide examples of how each country has at one time or other: (a) not engaged in or funded humanitarian action that would have accorded with its values, because its interests were not at stake or because such action would have been counter to its interests; (b) engaged in humanitarian action as per its values

despite no apparent self-interest, or even against its self-interest (at least in terms of the opportunity cost of allocating resources); and (c) engaged in contradictory policy when values and interests

conflict (e.g. the UK in Yemen). Given the diversity of examples, what is not clear is what determines the balance that will be struck between values and interests in any given case.



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# 4 Conclusions and implications for the aid community

The balance between state interests and values is often under-analysed in relation to humanitarian action. Using a foreign policy lens to understand how states engage in humanitarian action, and juggle competing interests, values and priorities, is a powerful way to consider both DAC and non-DAC donors against a common framework – as well as offering suggestions on how best to engage them in advocating for more effective humanitarian action.

This study has explored how the humanitarian action undertaken by different states interacts with their foreign policy in a period of geopolitical turbulence. It has shown that state humanitarian action is constantly evolving in an elaborate relationship with other foreign policy priorities. There are multiple examples of where these other interests take the focus away from humanitarian priorities, such as when national security and trade opportunities dominate. But to argue for the depoliticisation of aid is both unrealistic and misses the opportunity to harness the power of states – both DAC and non-DAC – for better humanitarian outcomes by engaging with them differently. Humanitarian action is inescapably part of foreign policy, and needs to be considered in that light.

To revisit one of our opening questions: aid can be at once humanitarian and in the national interest, despite this being uncomfortable territory for humanitarians. That these two goals need not be intrinsically opposed – but also where they are in conflict – needs to be better defined and explained. The following implications and recommendations should be considered in engaging with a foreign policy approach to state humanitarian action.

## 4.1 Implications and recommendations

Based on this analysis we make the following recommendations to states, donors and humanitarian agencies:

### Understand the politics

Applying a foreign policy lens can help in better understanding how countries can engage effectively beyond donorship. The politics of aid is a reality. Understanding the bureaucratic and political drivers of donor decision-making is therefore key to engaging constructively and effectively with that process. In the current climate of realist approaches to foreign policy, this means engaging with the language of ‘aid in the national interest’ and finding ways to express and promote principled and values-based approaches in those terms – but without being co-opted or compromising these values. Where necessary, realist narratives should be countered with arguments based on values.

Humanitarian actors must recognise that bureaucracies are complex and not as monolithic as they may appear, and should give greater priority to finding champions and opportunities to influence people and processes. Engaging directly with diplomats for example – whether in the field or at headquarters – rather than just aid officials, offers scope to understand and influence the wider context within which states engage in crises.

Building stronger bridges between the diplomatic and humanitarian parts of governments to forge a pragmatic partnership based on more mutual understanding of motivations and drivers is critical. Rather than seeing diplomats as the ‘dark side’ of government, their role in managing multiple interests means that they need to be engaged if humanitarians are to better communicate the reasons for a humanitarian focus. Keeping an open mind towards the opportunities of a more politically informed, constructive engagement with foreign policy-making should strengthen rather than undermine humanitarian priorities.

### Recognise diversity in donorship

In advocacy terms, there is a role for civil society – primarily domestic NGOs – to push their governments to clarify how they balance competing interests, why decisions appear to go against stated humanitarian policy, or where different policies are incompatible.

Civil society space is essential to ensuring a critical voice. Donors must continue to support independent civil society, both at crisis level, through support to locally led responses, and internationally.

Recognising that all governments, whether DAC or non-DAC make (usually rational) choices between different priorities argues for a deeper understanding of what drives different states' decisions, so that advocacy can be tailored to their specific frames of reference. This applies particularly to relationships between DAC and non-DAC donors. While being realistic about the limits of such partnerships, DAC/GHD donors should broaden their fora or find alternatives for discussing policy towards countries in crisis.

While DAC donors continue to provide the bulk of reported contributions to the 'formal' humanitarian system, comprising the UN, the Red Cross Movement and NGOs, there is increasing recognition of the role of non-DAC donors in funding or operating in different crises. Beyond simple caricature, their motivations are in reality just as complex and multifaceted as those of the DAC donors. There is a need to recognise the different advantages and disadvantages of different donors, whether through geography or relationships in particular crises, for example as a result of colonial history or shared religious affiliation. Different donors also prioritise different sectors or geographic areas for funding, for example Australia's focus on the Asia-Pacific, or the Gulf States' preference for the Arab world. Better appreciation of and transparency around diverse

approaches is needed to do aggregate each state's efforts, rather than assuming there is a single ideal donor model. Relationships are being strengthened between DAC and non-DAC donors, particularly at field/crisis level, but further efforts are needed to cultivate stronger institutional relationships based on shared interests and a more nuanced understanding of diverse approaches to humanitarian action. This could take the form of exchanges for institution-building or joint research.

### **Strive for transparency**

States need to be more explicit and transparent about their humanitarian commitments, and where these commitments collide or conflict with other objectives and policies, where they are de-prioritised, or where they align with the national interest. Models of crisis-level donor coordination according to comparative advantage should be documented and highlighted, for example in DAC peer reviews.

### **Revisit humanitarian principles across cultures**

Central to building credible relationships between 'rising' and 'established' donors will be an appreciation of the different values underlying their responses – but also identifying where there is common ground. Principles can exclude, but they can also be made operationally meaningful. Emerging platforms for non-Western civil society and foundations, such as the Arab Foundations Forum, can be galvanised to provide an opportunity for collaboration with international actors, and for investments in in-depth and sustained debate on aid policies around the world.

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