

A short note on four different emergency management mechanisms in the Chinese government disaster response

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Abstract

China's government emergency management has the capacity to stand up an emergency management office, an emergency management headquarters, a joint defence and control command mechanism, and an emergency management joint conference. This short note compares these different mechanisms along several important dimensions. The overall emergency management organization and command system of COVID-19 is analyzed specifically.

KEYWORDS

China, comprehensive coordination ability, emergency management headquarters, emergency management organization and command system, joint defence and control command mechanism

1 | DIVERSIFIED EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION AND COMMAND SYSTEM IN CHINA

Government emergency management is an important part of China's "one case, three systems" framework (Lv & Han, 2019; Lv & Xue, 2016), and is one of the key tasks of government social management (Xue, 2010). In practice, governments at all levels in China adopt different emergency management mechanisms to coordinate their work (Hu, 2012).

The Chinese government underwent a massive reform of government institutions in 2018 (Lv & Han, 2019). The reform created a ministry, the Ministry of Emergency Management, which is specifically responsible for disaster relief and rescue in natural disasters and accidents and calamities (Kong, 2021). Before 2018, all emergency management functions were scattered among different ministries (Jung & Song, 2015).

At present, four mechanisms are prominent in the emergency management structure of the Chinese government (Kong, 2020). These are the ability to stand up an *emergency management headquarter*, an *emergency management office*, an *emergency*

management joint conference, and/or a *joint defence and control command mechanism* (Lv, 2017).

During the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome period, the State Council of China established the *national emergency management headquarters* for the prevention and control of a typical pneumonia (Zhang & Tong, 2016). In March of the following year, China's Ministry of Health set up a *health emergency management office*, responsible for the organization and coordination of emergency preparedness and response to public health emergencies. During the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the State Council of China set up the *earthquake relief emergency management headquarters* to deal with the catastrophic natural disaster (Zhong, 2018). Also in 2008, the State Council of China set up a national leading group to deal with the Sanlu-brand infant milk powder incident and adopted an *emergency management joint conference* mechanism to deal with the incident. During the pandemic of influenza A (H1N1) in 2009, China's Ministry of Health took the lead in establishing a *joint defence and control command mechanism*. In 2019, the general office of the State Council of China approved the establishment of an *inter-ministerial emergency management joint conference system* for natural disaster prevention and control to deal with comprehensive natural

disaster risks. More recently during the COVID-19 outbreak, the National Health Protection Commission of China activated a *joint defence and control command mechanism* to cope with the epidemic (State Council of China, 2021).

Why does the Chinese government adopt different emergency management mechanisms in the face of different emergencies? What are their different characteristics in the overall emergency management structure?

2 | INTRODUCTION TO IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS

The *emergency management office* is a permanent functional department subordinate to the general office of the government at different levels (see Table 1). The emergency management office is mainly composed of personnel with emergency response responsibilities in government offices. It primarily performs the functions of daily emergency duty, information collection, and comprehensive coordination and functions as a hub for operations. The emergency management office as a comprehensive emergency management platform specifically covers monitoring and warning system, organization and command system, information system, rescue and disposal system, recovery and reconstruction system, and disaster prevention and mitigation system.

Emergency management headquarters is a decision-making agency activated under specific circumstances and is a nonpermanent organization. Its main responsibility is to implement the decisions and arrangements of the higher government. To that end, it analyzes and judges the situation, puts forward emergency response measures and plans, issues directives, and guides, inspects, and supervises the work of subordinate organizations. The emergency management headquarters has both predisaster logistical mobilization capabilities, information integration capabilities, and the ability to determine communication strategies. As a result, it usually consists of a limited number of experts in different fields, including key decision makers, experts in areas relevant to the crisis at hand, professionals responsible for intelligence information exchange and dissemination, and legal experts.

As for the *joint defence and control command mechanism*, it is a multidepartment coordination organization under the leadership of an entrusted lead department. Its main responsibilities are to carry out multisectoral consultation, information dissemination, and supervision for specific emergencies. The *emergency management joint conference* for its part is a deliberative and coordinating agency set up at all levels of government include coordination and macroguidance in emergency management work; studying and formulating relevant policies; supervising and inspecting the implementation of policies, such as fund raising; and reporting major issues to the higher authorities. The rich history and set of path dependencies in and between these mechanisms deserve its own book.

TABLE 1 The main features of the primary four mechanisms in China's emergency management structure.

| Main features | Emergency management office | Emergency management headquarters | Joint defence and control command mechanism | Emergency management joint conference |
|--------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Institutional properties | Permanent offices in the government | Decision-making agency | Multidepartmental coordinating agency | General interdepartmental deliberative coordination agency |
| Personnel composition | Government office personnel | Government leaders take the lead, the main person in charge of the relevant departments to participate | Government entrusted the department in charge of the main leadership, the relevant departments in charge of participation | Government leaders or department heads leads the relevant department heads to participate |
| Coordination method | Daily duty emergency, information aggregation, and comprehensive coordination play the role of the operational hub of emergency management | Perform emergency response duties for specific emergencies and issue directive requirements | To carry out multisectoral consultation, information dissemination, and supervision for specific emergencies | Long-term special emergency response work for macroguidance, research and policy development, supervision, and inspection |

3 | AN EXAMPLE OF HOW THE DIFFERENCES MATTER: COVID-19 IN WUHAN, CHINA

As the *emergency management office* deals more with day-to-day matters, emergency matters with great impact need other response mechanism as well. The *joint defence and control command mechanism* is used in China's COVID-19 response, which requires the participation of departments including the Ministry of Emergency Management, the Health and Welfare Commission, the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and so forth. It is an interministerial practice and a concrete expression of China's national system in disaster relief. This mechanism was activated in January 2020 under the leadership of the National Health and Welfare Commission. It had 32 member departments, which included epidemic prevention and control, medical treatment, scientific research, publicity, foreign affairs, logistics support, front work, and other working groups under the leadership of the relevant ministries and commissions, with clear responsibility, division of labour and cooperation to form an effective joint force for epidemic prevention and control (State Council of China, 2021).

On January 25, the CPC Central Committee also set up a central leading group to deal with COVID-19, which carried out its work under the leadership of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee. The Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee plays the role of *emergency management headquarters*. The joint defence and control command mechanism of the State Council continues to be responsible for coordination and dispatch, and all systems and forces of the Party, government and army are fully involved (State Council of China, 2021). At the same time, due to the regional differences of the epidemic situation, local government leading groups and joint prevention and control mechanism for COVID-19 have been established in other places of China.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No data used in this study.

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