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Spiral Ascent: The Evolution and Development of the Concept of the "National Emergency Management System"

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Abstract

The national emergency management system is a beam-and-column structure in which a functional "beam" and an enabling "column" are fitted to one another. Adopting a "structure–time" mode of analysis and examining official documents, this article describes the development process and evolutionary trajectory of the concept of the "national emergency management system" in China since the founding of the People's Republic. The study shows that, marked by the fight against SARS in 2003, the convening of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, and the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018, the concept has passed through four principal stages: an incubation period centred on classified management (before the 2003 SARS campaign); a founding period under the rubric of the emergency management system (the "4+1" structure), from the 2003 SARS campaign to the 18th Party Congress in 2012; an expansion period under the rubric of the public safety system (the "4+1+1" structure), from the 18th Party Congress to the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018; and an adjustment period under the rubric of the emergency management system, version 2.0 (the "1.5+0.5+1" structure), following the establishment of the Ministry. The evolution of the concept exhibits the character of a spiral ascent. The COVID-19 response of 2020 prompted a readjustment of the national emergency management system to a "2.5+1+1" structure; whether it will subsequently be adjusted to a "3+1+1" or even a "4+1+1" structure remains to be observed.

Keywords: national emergency management system, beam-and-column structure, conceptual evolution, "structure–time" mode of analysis, spiral ascent

1 Raising the Problem

The Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China set out the overall goal of comprehensively deepening reform: "to improve and develop the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and to advance the modernisation of China's governance system and governance capacity". Emergency management is an important component of national governance, and "advancing the modernisation of the emergency management system and capacity" has accordingly become the overall goal of China's emergency management work in the new era. On 29 November 2019, while presiding over the 19th collective study session of the 19th Central Political Bureau, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed the need to give full play to the characteristics and strengths of China's emergency management system and to actively advance the modernisation of that system and its capacity. The national emergency management work conference held on 6–7 January 2020 proposed "striving to advance the modernisation of the emergency management system and capacity".[1] At the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau held on 3 February 2020, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed: "In view of the shortcomings and deficiencies exposed in the response to this epidemic, we must improve the national emergency management system and enhance our capacity to handle urgent, difficult, dangerous and burdensome tasks."[2]

Although "national emergency management system" has been put forward as a formal concept and is used across a wide range, practical departments and the theoretical community do not express it in entirely consistent terms, nor do they understand its connotation and denotation in an entirely consistent way. As regards expression, the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau held on 3 February 2020 used "national emergency management system", whereas the meeting of 29 April 2020 expressed it as "strengthening the construction of public health and other emergency systems". This divergence of concepts is also reflected in specific domains such as natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health incidents and social safety incidents. Taking public health emergencies as an example: in the speeches delivered at the 12th meeting of the Central Committee for Comprehensively Deepening Reform on 14 February 2020, at

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the symposium with responsible officials of the relevant departments, experts and scholars on 2 March, and during the inspection of epidemic prevention and control work in Wuhan, Hubei Province, on 10 March, General Secretary Xi Jinping expressed it respectively as "improving the national public health emergency management system", "disease prevention and control and the public health emergency system are important components of the national strategic system", and "making efforts to perfect the public health emergency management system". As regards conceptual scope, the national emergency management system sometimes covers the four categories of emergency — natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health incidents and social safety incidents — and sometimes only the two categories of natural disasters and accidents and disasters. In his speech presiding over the 19th collective study session of the 19th Central Political Bureau, for example, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed "responding to and handling all kinds of disasters and accidents in good time", in which case the referents of the national emergency management system were mainly the domain of disasters and accidents (that is, the two categories of natural disasters and accidents and disasters), excluding public health incidents and social safety incidents. In many speeches during the fight against COVID-19 in 2020, however, it was expressed as "strengthening the construction of public health and other emergency management systems", in which case the national emergency management system evidently also included public health incidents and other domains, and was not confined to natural disasters and accidents and disasters.

Viewed longitudinally, at different times the official discourse has also alternated among "emergency management system", "emergency system", "public safety system" and other concepts that differ from one another to some degree while being closely connected. At the national emergency management work conference convened by the State Council on 22–23 July 2005, for instance, Premier Wen Jiabao stressed "strengthening the construction of the national emergency system and emergency management work"; in the government work report delivered on 5 March 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao stressed that "the national emergency management system has been basically established". In November 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee proposed "improving the public safety system" and "improving the emergency management system" within that framework. The alternation among these expressions shows that the concept has not yet settled into a single, stable formulation.

"Terminology is the carrier of concepts, and the standardisation and unification of terminology is the foundation of scientific research."[3] The *Doctrine of the Mean* in the *Book of Rites* says: "The same ruts for carriages, the same script for writing, the same conduct for conduct." In the face of cross-boundary emergencies, unity of command among different departments, different regions, different industries and different personnel is of the utmost importance. The American Incident Command System (ICS) arose precisely because the response to the California forest fires of September 1970 lacked common standards and unified command.[4] To actively advance the modernisation of China's emergency management system and capacity, it is first necessary to establish a unified and standardised terminology system and to define clearly the connotation and denotation of the relevant concepts. The purpose of this article is to describe, by collecting official documents and analysing them textually, the development process of the concept of the "national emergency management system" in China since the founding of the People's Republic and especially since the 2003 SARS campaign, to summarise the logic of its evolution, and to look ahead to its development trend.

2 Conceptual Framework and Sources

2.1 The emergency management system: a beam-and-column structure

Different scholars have offered different conceptual definitions of the national emergency management system. Gao Xiaoping, for example, holds that "the emergency management system refers to the totality of the organisation, institutions, behaviour, resources and other related emergency elements, and of the relationships among those elements, in responding to public emergencies."[5] Xue Lan holds that the emergency management system "is an integrated network constituted by the government and various other social organisations for responding to emergencies", and that "it includes laws and regulations, institutional bodies (including public and private sectors), mechanisms and rules, capacity and technology, and environment and culture."[6] Xiao Xi and Chen Xu, for their part, hold that "the modernisation of the emergency management system means, under the guiding principles of the modernisation of the national governance system and in line with the strategic direction of the overall national security concept, reintegrating the supporting ideas, management system, management process and operating mechanisms."[7] The project "Analysis of Civil Security Systems in Europe" holds that an emergency management system is the various state apparatuses — policies, institutions and mechanisms — designed to respond effectively to various threats, protect the safety of the people and/or maintain the operation of critical infrastructure.[8]

A system is "a whole constituted by a number of interrelated and mutually constraining things".[9] An emergency management system is a whole composed of many elements or constituent parts that possess certain functions and are organically linked to one another in the course of emergency management activities. Drawing the above views together, the

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emergency management system may be defined as "a whole constituted by such elements as the leadership system, value objectives, institutional norms, resource guarantees, technical methods and operating environment related to emergency response, which are interrelated and mutually constraining".[10] As a processual activity for responding to emergencies, emergency management takes as its object four categories of emergency — natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health incidents and social safety incidents (together with other emergencies that may newly arise); its process comprises four links — prevention and emergency preparedness, monitoring and early warning, emergency handling and rescue, and post-event recovery and reconstruction. As regards management elements, besides the management object — the emergency itself (what is managed) — there are also the management purpose (why it is managed), the management subject (who manages), the management method (how it is managed) and the management environment (under what circumstances it is managed).

Following the architectural logic of beams and columns, a complete national emergency management system may be regarded as a beam-and-column structure in which horizontal and vertical elements are fitted together (see Figure 1). The "columns" refer to the domains of events covered by the national emergency management system, namely the four categories of emergency: natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health incidents and social safety incidents. Each category of event has its own distinct patterns and characteristics, and makes different demands on response. The "columns" of the national emergency management system mainly satisfy the particular requirements of professional response to each category of emergency, playing a functional (or "dispositional") role. Unlike the "columns", the "beam" of the beam-and-column structure mainly satisfies the common requirements of an integrated response to all categories of emergency, playing an enabling (or "facilitating") role — that is, by integrating such elements as the management purpose, management subject, management method and management environment, it achieves unified command and coordinated response across all categories of emergency.[11] At the same time, since the 18th Party Congress the overall national security concept has become the theoretical guide for China's formulation of national security strategy in the new situation, and emergency management is an important component of national security; the overall national security concept is therefore also the intellectual guide for doing emergency management work well. It may accordingly be placed at the very top of the "beam" of the national emergency management system (the "upper beam"). In sum, the "columns" of the national emergency management system emphasise following the characteristics of each category of emergency, conducting classified management and professional response, and playing a functional role; the "beam" emphasises attending to the common patterns of all categories of emergency and to the chain-linked effects among them, conducting overall coordination and integrated response, and playing an enabling role.

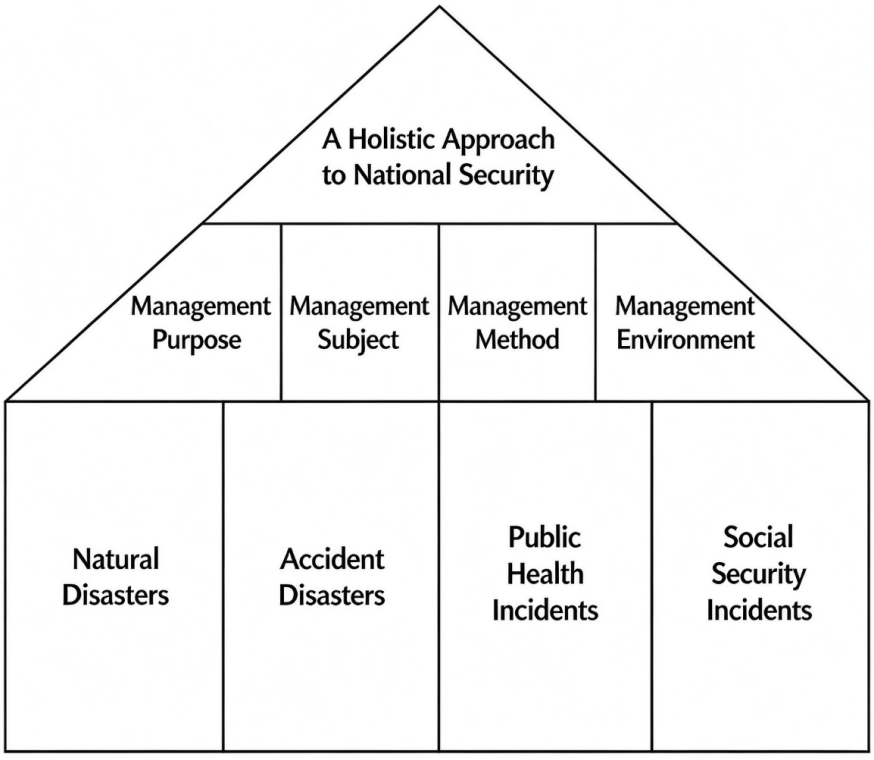


Figure 1 Schematic diagram of the beam-and-column structure of the national emergency management system. Source: drawn by the author.

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The beam-and-column structure constitutes the basic category of the national emergency management system and gives rise to a diversity of models of that system. In overall structure, for example, the national emergency management system may lay emphasis on the "columns", centring on classified management; or it may fit "beam" and "columns" together, strengthening integrated coordination on the basis of classified management. As regards the specific scope within which the "columns" are integrated, it may cover all four categories of emergency and be planned and designed in a unified way, or it may cover only some of them and be planned and coordinated only within a partial domain. As regards the overall coordination exercised through the "beam", it may adhere to the overall national security concept as its guide and incorporate emergency management within the ambit of national security, or it may distinguish emergency management from national security and set the two somewhat apart.

2.2 Research sources

In order to describe comprehensively and systematically the evolution of the concept of the "national emergency management system" in China since the founding of the People's Republic, and especially since the 2003 SARS campaign, and to summarise the process and laws of that evolution, this article follows a "structure–time" narrative logic and adopts document analysis — that is, it studies the official documents relating to the national emergency management system that have been collected, so as to ascertain the development process and evolutionary trajectory of the concept in China.

Specifically, the official documents collected for this study comprise four categories. The first is important institutions: laws and regulations such as the *Emergency Response Law*, the *National Security Law* and the *Biosecurity Law*; the reports of the National Party Congresses and the government work reports of the State Council; and central policy documents such as the *Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Advancing the Reform of the Institutional Mechanisms for Disaster Prevention, Mitigation and Relief* and the *Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Advancing the Reform and Development of Work Safety*. The second is important expositions: the important speeches, talks, instructions and directives of Party and state leaders, and especially of General Secretary Xi Jinping, on the national emergency management system. The third is important activities: for instance, the collective study sessions of the Central Political Bureau on themes related to emergency management, the reform of emergency management institutions, and the national emergency management work conferences, insofar as they bear on the national emergency management system. The fourth is important reporting: for instance, the relevant articles published in Xinhua News Agency, *People's Daily*, *Qiushi* and other leading central-level media.

3 The Evolutionary Process of the Concept of the "National Emergency Management System"

Document analysis shows that, marked by the fight against SARS in 2003, the convening of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, and the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018, the concept of the "national emergency management system" passed through four stages of development, forming in turn a conceptual map centred on classified management, then on the emergency management system, then on the public safety system, and then once again on the emergency management system (version 2.0). The evolutionary process as a whole exhibits the character of a spiral ascent.

3.1 Classified management of emergencies (before the 2003 SARS campaign)

From the founding of the People's Republic to the SARS campaign of 2003, China mainly operated a model centred on the classified management of individual disaster types, relying chiefly on the various vertical "lines" to conduct professional response from top to bottom to the common categories of emergency — natural disasters, work safety accidents, infectious disease outbreaks and the like. The demand for horizontal coordination across regions and departments was relatively limited. At this stage there was essentially no comprehensive official formulation of a "national emergency management system". Indeed, during this period the two terms that underlie the concept — "emergency" (*tufa shijian*) and "emergency management" — were not used frequently in China, and their connotation and denotation differed considerably from what they later became.

In fact, "emergency" (*tufa shijian*) is a term established by Chinese usage rather than a one-to-one translation of a foreign word; the closest English equivalent is "emergency". An examination of the origin and evolution of the concept shows that before the mid-1980s "emergency" was used mainly in the military and diplomatic sphere, where national security was at stake, whereas from the mid-1980s until the 2003 SARS campaign it was used mainly in the sphere of public order, where social security was at stake.[12] The same is true of the term "emergency management", which is itself an import and was first introduced into China by the nuclear power industry. On 27 May 1989 *People's Daily* published an article entitled "China's nuclear safety work enters the track of legalisation", which mentioned "nuclear accident emergency management".

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At the time, however, the concept of "emergency management" was not commonly used in China.[13]

3.2 Under the rubric of the "emergency management system (version 1.0)" (from the 2003 SARS campaign to the 18th Party Congress in 2012)

The sudden outbreak of SARS in 2003 was a major test of China's emergency management. In exposing marked shortcomings and deficiencies in China's economic and social development and especially in its emergency management work, the campaign against SARS also became a "window of opportunity" for comprehensively advancing the reform and development of China's emergency management. On 28 July of that year, at the national conference on SARS prevention and control, General Secretary Hu Jintao stressed: "Strengthening the Party's governance capacity must be advanced in practice, and especially in the practice of the crucial moment and of responding to emergencies." It was necessary to "enhance our capacity to respond to all kinds of emergencies and risks".[14] After the victory over SARS, the comprehensive strengthening of emergency management entered the policy agenda of the highest leadership, and China's emergency management work accordingly entered a period of building an emergency management system whose basic content was the "one plan, three systems" (emergency response plans, and the emergency management system, mechanisms and legal framework).[15] This period is known as the stage of "comprehensive initiation and development" of China's emergency management.[16]

In this process, as comprehensive concepts, "emergency" and "national emergency management system" entered the official field of vision and were very quickly applied and promoted on a wide scale. The domain covered by "emergency" now expanded from the military and diplomatic sphere and the public order sphere to the four categories of natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health incidents and social safety incidents — meaning that it had grown from a domain-specific concept into a comprehensive one. In August 2007 the 29th session of the Standing Committee of the Tenth National People's Congress adopted the *Emergency Response Law of the People's Republic of China* (hereinafter the *Emergency Response Law*), an important law enacted in accordance with the Constitution to standardise the common conduct of responding to all categories of emergency.[17] Article 3 of the Law provides that "the term 'emergency' as used in this Law means a natural disaster, accident or disaster, public health incident or social safety incident that occurs suddenly and causes or may cause serious harm to society, requiring the adoption of emergency handling measures." As an overall system of the various elements and constituent parts of emergency response activity, the "national emergency management system" also came to be regarded officially as a comprehensive concept, and became a "4+1" beam-and-column structure composed jointly of the "columns" of professional response to the four categories of emergency and the "beam" of coordinated response to all categories of emergency (see Figure 2).

Specifically, as regards the object of management, the national emergency management system at this stage comprised natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health incidents and social safety incidents — the four categories of emergency — and professional response to these emergencies constituted the "columns" of the system. As regards management behaviour, the "one plan, three systems" broadly corresponded to the common requirements of an integrated response to all categories of emergency in respect of management purpose, management subject, management method and management environment, and together these constituted the "beam" of the system. The management purpose refers mainly to taking the scientific outlook on development as the guide, safeguarding the safety of people's lives and property, and achieving safe economic and social development; the management subject refers to relying on the emergency offices of government general offices to play a pivotal role and to coordinate a comprehensive emergency management system comprising a number of deliberative and coordinating bodies and joint conference systems; the management method refers to taking the Constitution as the basis, the *Emergency Response Law* as the core and the relevant individual laws and regulations as the supporting framework, making full use of modern scientific and technological means, and doing well in the whole process of emergency response — prevention and emergency preparedness, monitoring and early warning, emergency handling and rescue, and post-event recovery and reconstruction; and the management environment refers mainly to the increasingly severe public safety situation at home and abroad, the increasingly open economic and social environment, and the state of safety culture in society as a whole.

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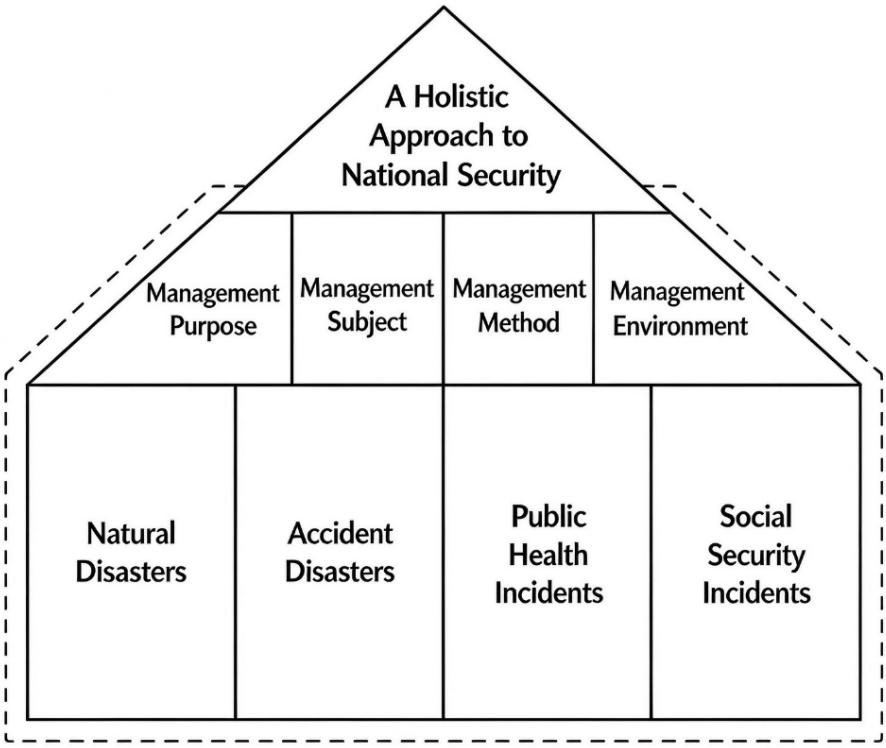


Figure 2 Schematic diagram of the structure of China's national emergency management system, 2003–2012. Source: drawn by the author.

As the construction of the emergency management system with the "one plan, three systems" as its basic framework made major progress between 2003 and 2012, "national emergency management system" (sometimes also called "national emergency system") became a term frequently used by the official discourse of the period. At the national emergency management work conference convened by the State Council on 22–23 July 2005, for example, Premier Wen Jiabao stressed that strengthening the construction of the national emergency system and emergency management work required doing well in such tasks as perfecting the organisational system, the operating mechanisms and the guarantee systems.[18] In October 2006 the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee deliberated and adopted the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society*, which stated: "Perfect the emergency management systems and mechanisms, and respond effectively to all kinds of risks." In the government work report delivered to the National People's Congress on 5 March 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao stated: "Strengthen the construction of the emergency system and mechanisms, and enhance the capacity to prevent and handle emergencies." He also announced: "The national emergency management system has been basically established."[19]

The application of the concept of the "national emergency management system" is also reflected in the drafting of special plans for the construction of the national emergency management system. Section 5 of Chapter 41 of the outline of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, issued in March 2006, was devoted to "strengthening the construction of the public safety system" and made specific arrangements for "strengthening the construction of the emergency system": "Establish and perfect the emergency management system, strengthen the construction of command information systems, emergency material guarantees, professional disaster relief and rescue teams, emergency standards systems and transport and on-site communications guarantees and other key areas and key projects, perfect the social mobilisation mechanism following the occurrence of major and especially major natural disasters, and enhance the capacity to handle public emergencies." In December of the same year the General Office of the State Council issued the *Plan for the Construction of the National Emergency System for Public Emergencies during the Eleventh Five-Year Plan Period* (Guobanfa [2006] No. 106), China's first special plan at national level for the construction of an emergency management system. Section 3 of Chapter 41 of the outline of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, issued in March 2011, once again set out requirements for "improving the emergency system for emergencies": "Adhering to the principle of laying equal emphasis on prevention and emergency response and combining normal with abnormal conditions, establish and perfect a national emergency system for emergencies with unified command, a rational structure, rapid response, strong guarantees and efficient operation, and enhance the capacity for crisis management and risk management." In August 2012 the General Office of the State Council issued the *Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the Construction of the National Emergency System for Emergencies* (Guobanfa [2012] No. 43).

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3.3 Under the rubric of the "public safety system" (from the 18th Party Congress in 2012 to the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018)

Since the 18th Party Congress, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era. During this period "public safety incident" replaced "emergency" and "national public safety system" replaced "national emergency management system" as the terms more often used in official discourse. On the official definition, the "national public safety system" is a "4+1+1" structure (see Figure 3): the "4" refers to the four domains of emergency — disaster prevention and mitigation, work safety, food and drug safety, and public order prevention and control — with emphasis on normal-time management, that is, on doing well in day-to-day safety supervision and in preventing and resolving risks, and these are the "columns" of the national emergency management system; the first "1" refers to emergency management for all categories of emergency, with emphasis on abnormal-time management, that is, on doing well in risk monitoring and early warning and in emergency handling, and this is the "lower beam"; the second "1" refers to the overall national security concept, which is the intellectual guide for doing public safety work well in the new era, and this is the "upper beam". In this "4+1+1" beam-and-column structure, the previously integrative national emergency management system is regarded as one component of the national public safety system.

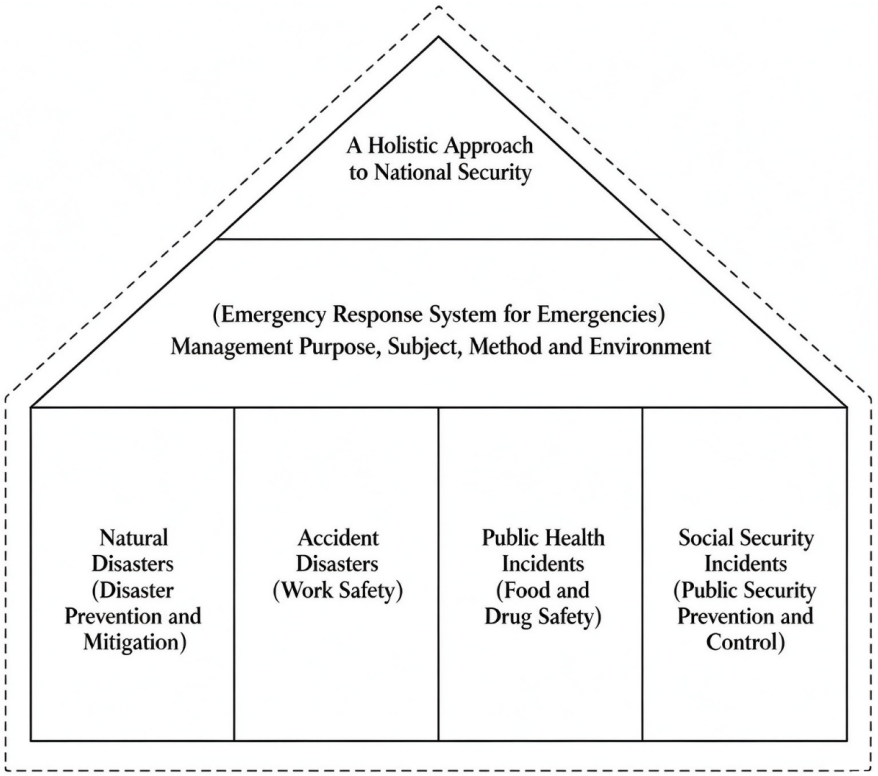


Figure 3 Schematic diagram of the structure of China's national emergency management system, 2012–2018. Source: drawn by the author.

The proposal of the concept of the "public safety system" and of its "4+1+1" content structure in fact began with the outline of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, issued in March 2011. Chapter 41 of that outline proposed "strengthening the construction of the public safety system", stressing the need to "promote the establishment of a public safety system that combines proactive prevention and control with emergency handling, and traditional methods with modern means" in four respects: guaranteeing food and drug safety, tightening work safety management, perfecting the emergency system for emergencies, and improving the public order prevention and control system.

In November 2012 the report of the 18th Party Congress proposed: "Strengthen the construction of the public safety system and of the foundation of work safety in enterprises, and curb major and especially major safety accidents." Thereafter "public safety" and "public safety system" became high-frequency terms in official usage. In November 2013 the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform*, deliberated and adopted by the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, set out, around the improvement of the public safety system, the tasks of institutional and mechanical reform in food and drug safety, work safety, disaster prevention, mitigation and relief, and public order prevention and control. In October 2014 the Fourth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee proposed strengthening legislation on public safety and advancing the rule of law in public safety. On 29 May 2015 the 18th Central Political Bureau held its 23rd collective study session on

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improving the public safety system; General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed the need to improve the public safety system in five respects: doing well in the comprehensive governance of public order, raising the quality and safety level of agricultural products, enhancing the capacity to withstand and respond to natural disasters, doing well in work safety, and strengthening supervision of food and drug safety. Chapter 72 of the outline of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, issued in March 2016, broadly followed this line of thinking, proposing to improve the public safety system and to weave a comprehensive, three-dimensional public safety net in four respects: comprehensively raising the level of work safety, enhancing capacity for disaster prevention, mitigation and relief, innovating the public order prevention and control system, and strengthening the construction of the emergency system for emergencies.

The overall national security concept was put forward at the first meeting of the Central National Security Commission on 15 April 2014. Presiding over that meeting, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed for the first time that the overall national security concept be upheld, stressing the construction of a national security system integrating political security, territorial security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, science and technology security, information security, ecological security, resource security and nuclear security. The overall national security concept thus became "a powerful intellectual weapon for safeguarding and shaping the security of a major country with Chinese characteristics under the new situation"[20], and also "the intellectual guide for the construction of China's public safety system".[21] Central and local authorities also established national security commissions as decision-making and deliberative-coordinating bodies for national security work under Party committees at each level, to coordinate major matters and important work bearing on national security. While presiding over the 23rd collective study session of the 18th Central Political Bureau, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that the safeguarding of public safety must consciously be "considered within the implementation of the overall national security concept".[22] The *National Security Law* promulgated in 2015 listed the prevention, reduction and resolution of social contradictions, and the proper handling of public health, social safety and other emergencies affecting national security and social stability, as key tasks in safeguarding national security. On 17 February 2017, while presiding over a symposium on national security work, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed: "At present and for some time to come, work safety in all respects — political security, economic security, territorial security, social security and cybersecurity — must be given prominence. The three-dimensional public order prevention and control system must be perfected, and work safety governance strengthened in key areas such as transport, fire protection and hazardous chemicals."[23]

The core content of the public safety system with the "4+1+1" basic structure that obtained between the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018 is concentrated in the relevant formulations of the report of the 19th Party Congress. The report listed "upholding the overall national security concept" as one of the basic strategies for upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, and made arrangements for improving the public safety system: "Strengthen the construction of mechanisms for preventing and resolving social contradictions, and correctly handle contradictions among the people. Establish the concept of safe development, carry forward the idea that life is paramount and safety first, improve the public safety system, perfect the work safety responsibility system, resolutely curb major and especially major safety accidents, and enhance capacity for disaster prevention, mitigation and relief. Accelerate the construction of the public order prevention and control system ..."[24]

3.4 Under the rubric of the "emergency management system (version 2.0)" (after the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018)

The institutional reform of Party and state organs in 2018 integrated the functions of the relevant bodies and established the Ministry of Emergency Management as a constituent department of the State Council. As emergency management bodies at all levels were successively established, "national emergency management system" once again became a high-frequency term in wide official use. The *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions*, deliberated and adopted by the Third Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee, stated for example: "Strengthen, optimise and coordinate the construction of national emergency capacity, and build a national emergency capacity system with unified leadership, consistent authority and responsibility, and high authority and efficiency." The *Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions* stated: "Improve the public safety system, integrate and optimise emergency forces and resources, and promote the formation of an emergency management system with Chinese characteristics that features unified command, a combination of specialised and regular forces, rapid response, linkage between higher and lower levels, and a combination of peacetime and wartime functions." In his *Explanation of the Draft Decision and Draft Plan on Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions*, General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that one of the principal duties of the Ministry of Emergency Management is "to take charge of national emergency management and the construction of the system, and to promote the formation of an emergency management system with Chinese characteristics that features unified command, a combination of specialised and regular forces, rapid response,

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linkage between higher and lower levels, and a combination of peacetime and wartime functions".[25]

However, the "emergency" in the national emergency management system at this stage was chiefly "small emergency" rather than "big emergency": its referents were mainly work safety and natural disaster emergencies, and did not include public health incidents, social safety incidents, or other natural disasters (such as marine biological disasters) and other accidents and disasters (such as nuclear accidents).[26] This narrowly defined national emergency management system took the form of a "1.5+0.5+1" beam-and-column structure (see Figure 4): the "1.5" is the "columns" of the system, that is, the referents of the national emergency management system covered only natural disasters and work safety accidents within accidents and disasters; the "0.5" is the "lower beam" of the system, emphasising the comprehensive advantages of the emergency management departments rather than the overall coordination of the response to the four categories of emergency by the government emergency offices that had previously served as the operating pivot; and the "1" is the "upper beam" of the system, continuing to emphasise the guiding role of the overall national security concept. Correspondingly, in conceptual expression, the comprehensive concept of "emergency", which encompasses the four categories of event, was rarely used; the term "disaster accident", which carries a departmental colouring and covers only work safety and natural disaster emergencies, was used instead.

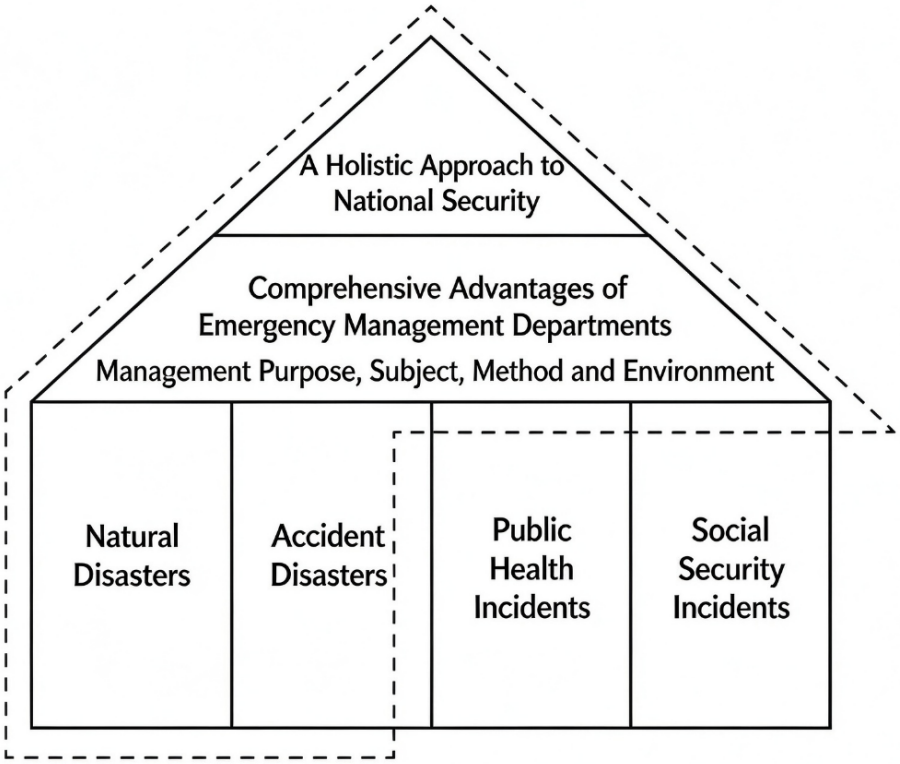


Figure 4 Schematic diagram of the structure of China's national emergency management system, 2018–2020. Source: drawn by the author.

While presenting the flag and delivering the instructions to the national comprehensive fire and rescue team, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed: "Establishing the national comprehensive fire and rescue team is a strategic decision taken by the Party Central Committee in adapting to the modernisation of the national governance system and governance capacity, and an important measure for building a new-era national emergency rescue system on the basis of China's national conditions and the characteristics of disasters and accidents."[27]

On 29 November 2019 the 19th Central Political Bureau held its 19th collective study session on the construction of China's emergency management system and capacity. The "1.5+0.5+1" beam-and-column structure of the national emergency management system that obtained after the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management is concentrated in the content of General Secretary Xi Jinping's speech when he presided over that study session. He pointed out: "Emergency management is an important component of the national governance system and governance capacity; it bears the important duty of preventing and resolving major safety risks and of responding to and handling all kinds of disasters and accidents in good time, and the important mission of protecting the safety of people's lives and property and safeguarding social stability. We must give full play to the characteristics and strengths of China's emergency management system, draw on useful foreign practice in emergency management, and actively advance the modernisation of the emergency management system and capacity." "In China the hidden dangers of accidents and the risks of safety are

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interwoven and superimposed, and are prone to occur and to occur often; the factors affecting public safety are increasing day by day. Strengthening the construction of the emergency management system and capacity is both an urgent task and a long-term task."[28] The national emergency management work conference held on 6–7 January 2020 responded to the requirements of the collective study session of the Central Political Bureau, stressing the need to strive to advance the modernisation of the emergency management system and capacity.

Since the establishment of the emergency management group, this "1.5+0.5+1" beam-and-column structure of the national emergency management system underwent partial change in the course of the fight against COVID-19 in 2020: the referents of the system expanded from work safety and natural disaster emergencies to public health emergencies, and health emergency management once again became an important component of the national emergency management system. On 3 February 2020, while presiding over a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed: "In view of the shortcomings and deficiencies exposed in the response to this epidemic, we must improve the national emergency management system and enhance our capacity to handle urgent, difficult, dangerous and burdensome tasks."[29] On 14 February, while presiding over the 12th meeting of the Central Committee for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, he stressed: "Perfect the systems and mechanisms for the prevention and control of major epidemics, and improve the national public health emergency management system."[30] On 2 March, while inspecting scientific research on COVID-19 prevention and control in Beijing, he stressed: "Disease prevention and control and the public health emergency system are important components of the national strategic system."[31] On 10 March, while making a special visit to Wuhan in Hubei Province to inspect COVID-19 prevention and control work, he stressed: "Efforts must be made to perfect the public health emergency management system, strengthen the rule-of-law guarantees for public health, reform and perfect the disease prevention and control system and the system for the prevention, control and treatment of major epidemics, improve the medical insurance and assistance system for major diseases, improve the unified emergency material guarantee system, and enhance the capacity and level of response to major public health emergencies."[32] The meeting of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau held on 29 April 2020 stressed: "Strengthen the construction of public health and other emergency systems, and enhance the capacity to respond to and handle major emergencies."[33] On 2 June, at a symposium with experts and scholars, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: "This fight against COVID-19 shows that China's public health service system, medical service system, medical security system, pharmaceutical supply guarantee system, and the system for the prevention, control and emergency management of major epidemics are on the whole effective, but there are also some weak links."[34] On 12 November, at the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the development and opening of Pudong, he stressed: "The concept of whole-life-cycle management must be carried through every link of the whole process of urban planning, construction and management, and the improvement of the public health emergency management system must be treated as an important link in enhancing governance capacity."[35] The *Recommendations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives through the Year 2035* (hereinafter the *Recommendations* of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee), deliberated and adopted at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee, stated: "Perfect the national emergency management system, strengthen the construction of the emergency material guarantee system, develop catastrophe insurance, and enhance capacity for disaster prevention, mitigation, resistance and relief."[36]

In conceptual expression, apart from continuing to use "accidents and disasters" when discussing the work of the emergency management departments, on other occasions the comprehensive terms "emergency" or "public health emergency (public health incident)" and other types of emergency concept were used with increasing frequency. On 5 February 2020, for example, at the third meeting of the Central Committee for Comprehensive Law-Based Governance, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: "Party committees and governments at all levels must comprehensively perform their duties in accordance with the law, persist in using rule-of-law thinking and rule-of-law methods to carry out epidemic prevention and control work, advance the construction of a law-based government in handling major emergencies, and raise the level of law-based governance and law-based administration."[37] On 12 March, in a telephone conversation with United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, he pointed out: "In the era of economic globalisation, such major emergencies will not be the last, and traditional and non-traditional security issues will continue to bring new tests."[38] On 26 March, addressing the G20 Extraordinary Leaders' Summit, he pointed out: "We need to explore the establishment of regional public health emergency liaison mechanisms and improve the speed of response to public health emergencies."[39] In his address at the opening ceremony of the video conference of the 73rd World Health Assembly on 18 May, he pointed out: "Humankind is experiencing the most serious global public health emergency since the end of the Second World War." "A major public health emergency will not be the last for humankind. In view of the shortcomings and deficiencies exposed by this epidemic, we must improve the public health security governance system and improve the speed of response to public health emergencies."[40] The *Recommendations* of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee stated that one of the main objectives of China's economic and social development during the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan period is that "the

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systems and mechanisms for preventing and resolving major risks will be continuously perfected, capacity to respond to public emergencies will be significantly enhanced, the level of natural disaster defence will be markedly raised, and the guarantees for development security will be more robust".[41]

Taking an overall view, in the course of the fight against COVID-19 China's national emergency management system gradually returned to a "3+1+1" beam-and-column structure (see Figure 1). The "3" means that, as regards referents, the system returned to natural disasters, accidents and disasters, and public health incidents (it has not yet been made clear whether social safety incidents should be included) as these had been current from the 2003 SARS campaign to the 18th Party Congress in 2012, and not merely work safety and natural disaster emergencies. The first "1" means a return to the emphasis, current in that same period, on giving play to the unified leadership, unified command and unified deployment duties of Party committees and governments at all levels, and not merely to the comprehensive advantages of the emergency management departments. The white paper *China's Actions in the Fight against COVID-19* points out that, after the outbreak, "all provinces, municipalities and counties across the country established emergency command mechanisms headed by the principal leaders of Party committees and governments, building from top to bottom a unified command, front-line guidance and overall coordination emergency decision-making and command system."[42] The second "1" continues to emphasise the guiding role of the overall national security concept in emergency management work. 15 April 2020 was the fifth National Security Education Day, with the theme "uphold the overall national security concept, coordinate traditional and non-traditional security, and provide a strong guarantee for winning a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects". After the outbreak of COVID-19, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed repeatedly that major infectious diseases and biosecurity risks must be understood from the height of national security. On 2 March, for instance, while inspecting scientific research on COVID-19 prevention and control in Beijing, he pointed out: "Major infectious diseases and biosecurity risks are major risk challenges bearing on national security and development and on the stability of the overall social situation. Biosecurity must be treated as an important component of overall national security."

4 Basic Conclusion: A Process of Spiral Ascent

Emergency management is an important component of national governance, and the national emergency management system is a beam-and-column structure in which a "beam" playing a functional role and a "column" playing an enabling role are fitted to one another. Since the founding of the People's Republic, along with China's economic and social development and the transformation of its governance model, both the conceptual usage and the actual content of the "national emergency management system" have undergone major changes. Taking an overall view, over the more than seventy years since the founding of the People's Republic the concept has undergone a spiral ascent of cyclical repetition and continuous improvement rather than a linear development: as regards conceptual usage, it has passed through an evolution of "national emergency management system (version 1.0) – national public safety system – national emergency management system (version 2.0)"; as regards actual content, it has passed through an evolution of "'4+1' beam-and-column structure – '4+1+1' beam-and-column structure – '1.5+0.5+1' beam-and-column structure".

The spiral ascent of the concept of the "national emergency management system" has comprised four principal stages. The first stage runs from the founding of the People's Republic to the 2003 SARS campaign, and is the incubation period of the concept. Under the model then prevailing, centred on the classified management of individual disaster types, the role of the "columns" of professional response to each category of emergency was relatively prominent, while the role of the "beam" of integrated response to all categories of emergency was less evident, and the concept had not yet been formally proposed. The second stage runs from the 2003 SARS campaign to the 18th Party Congress in 2012, and is the founding period of the concept. Having drawn the lessons of the SARS campaign, China comprehensively advanced the construction of an emergency management system with the "one plan, three systems" as its basic framework, establishing a "4+1" beam-and-column structure composed jointly of "columns" for professional response to the four categories of emergency — natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health incidents and social safety incidents — and a "beam" for integrated response to all categories of emergency, with emphasis on overall coordination and coordinated response to all categories of emergency. The third stage runs from the 18th Party Congress in 2012 to the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018, and is the expansion period of the concept. During this period the official discourse adopted the concept of the "public safety system" in place of that of the "emergency management system", and treated the emergency system for emergencies as a component of the public safety system, forming a "4+1+1" structure with disaster prevention and mitigation, work safety, food and drug safety, and public order prevention and control as the functional "columns", and with the emergency system for emergencies and the overall national security concept as the enabling "lower beam" and "upper beam" respectively. The fourth stage follows the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018, and is the adjustment period of the concept. During this period China's national emergency management system was gradually adjusted to a "1.5+0.5+1" structure with the response to work safety and natural disaster emergencies as the

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functional "columns", and with the comprehensive advantages of the emergency management departments and the overall national security concept as the enabling "lower beam" (the "small beam") and "upper beam" (the "large beam") respectively. In the course of the fight against COVID-19 in 2020, however, the concept underwent a certain readjustment: the response to public health emergencies was brought back within the ambit of the national emergency management system, and the duties of unified leadership, unified command and unified deployment of Party committees and governments at all levels were once again strengthened. Whether social safety incidents, and other accidents and disasters such as transport accidents, public facility and equipment accidents, and environmental pollution and ecological damage incidents, will be further incorporated; and whether emergency management committees at all levels will be established to better coordinate the response to the three categories of emergency other than social safety incidents, or even to all four categories — on these questions the theoretical community and practical departments have not yet reached full consensus. This means that, after the test of COVID-19, the structure of China's national emergency management system is being readjusted from "1.5+0.5+1" to a "2.5+1+1" structure; whether it will be adjusted to a "3+1+1" structure covering all accidents and disasters, or even to a "4+1+1" structure covering social safety incidents, remains to be observed.

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