

Response to Brancati (2007)

Brancati, D. 2007. “Political Aftershocks: The Impact of Earthquakes on Intrastate Conflict”. Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 51, no. 5, pp. 715-743.

This letter was not published in the journal because the journal's policy is not to publish Letters to the Editor, but the editor kindly agreed to publish a paragraph which is available at <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/publications.html#brancati2007>

4 October 2007

To the Editor of the Journal of Conflict Resolution:

I wish to thank Dr. Brancati for a pertinent article published in this journal on the impact of earthquakes on intrastate conflict (Brancati, 2007). The interaction between conflict and other disasters represents an important research area, particularly due to the implications for practice, such as providing humanitarian relief to enemies or addressing long-standing conflict in a post-disaster setting. I would urge caution regarding how my own small research contribution, termed “disaster diplomacy”, is represented in the paper.

Dr. Brancati indicates that my publications on this subject, represented by Kelman and Koukis (2000), state that “disasters mitigate conflict by fostering cooperation among groups” (p. 716) and “argue that natural disasters dampen conflict” (p. 719). As evidence, she uses the quotation modified from Kelman and Koukis (2000: p. 214) that “the cooperative spirit generated from common efforts to deal with disasters through either perceived necessity or choice from the humanitarian imperative possibly overrides pre-existing prejudices, breaking down barriers which then may never be rebuilt”. Dr. Brancati refers to one of the papers in Kelman and Koukis (2000) implying that Ker-Lindsay (2000), misspelled as “Ker-Lindsay” in Brancati (2007), is “suggesting that disasters foster cooperation” in the case of Greece and Turkey following the 1999 earthquakes (Brancati, 2007, p. 720).

A careful reading of this work reveals a different picture. The quotation from Kelman and Koukis (2000) states “possibly”—in the original, it reads “has the potential”—indicating an hypothesis or idea to explore. The three case studies presented do not confirm this hypothesis.

Ker-Lindsay (2000) writes “While the earthquakes certainly had a major impact in changing public perceptions of the relationship, to claim that the earthquakes brought about rapprochement is both factually wrong, and indeed weakens the basis for the process” (p. 216). He then explains why the post-disaster diplomacy attempts might have harmed the reconciliation. The first sentence of his abstract (p. 215) reads “This article challenges the widely held view that the Greek-Turkish rapprochement of 1999 was the direct result of the collaboration following the earthquakes that hit both countries that year.” Similarly, in describing USA-Cuba relations in the context of climate, Glantz (2000) writes “A broad-ranging rapprochement is not likely to result from a specific response to a climate-related problem” (p. 251). Holloway (2000) analyses the 1991-1993 drought emergency in Southern Africa to explain that “While diplomatic dividends can indeed flow from disaster relief efforts, in this instance, joint cooperation was only possible once potential military, economic, and other forms of regional confrontation that dominated the 1980s had been controlled” (p. 273).

Therefore, the material in Kelman and Koukis (2000) is lukewarm at best, and disparaging at worst, to the notion that disasters foster peace, even where the potential exists. The hypothesis proposed in the quotation above is not confirmed by the evidence presented and the excellent work of these three case study authors convinced me of the case against disaster diplomacy.

The subsequent disaster diplomacy literature supports this view by being similarly negative about the potential for disasters to mitigate conflicts. Kelman (2005) concludes from the 26 December 2004 tsunamis, including intrastate examples, that “Perhaps disaster diplomacy usually has the potential to yield positive outcomes, but the active decision is often to ensure that it does not

work” (paragraph 5.4). Across multiple case studies, Kelman (2006a) summarizes “The principal caution is that disaster diplomacy does not provide the complete answer to conflict. The reason is that a humanitarian imperative rarely dominates diplomatic decisions and actions. Meanwhile, the intermittency of many disaster-related activities implies that it is challenging to maintain sustained interest in a peace process based on disaster-related activities [after Glantz, 2000]. Disaster diplomacy can also be used to create and perpetuate conflict.” (p. 235). Finally, based on foreign aid offers in the wake of Hurricane Katrina striking the USA in 2005, Kelman (2007) suggests that “disaster diplomacy is neither inevitable nor a panacea. Instead, it must be approached with care, recognising that attempts to implement it could do more harm than good and might not work irrespective of intentions” (p. 305).

With such cautionary remarks based on the evidence presented, along with echoing statements in other disaster diplomacy publications (e.g. Kelman, 2006b; Kelman et al., 2006; Kelman and Gaillard, 2007), I believe that it is clear that I do not accept the inevitability of disaster-related activities reducing conflict and fostering peace. In contrast, I have been quite critical about using disaster diplomacy for peace processes.

I emphasise that I appreciate Dr. Brancati’s study and I will be using it to support my continuing investigations in this topic. I believe that she has made useful and important advances in understanding the interaction between conflict and other disasters. I respect and agree with her broad conclusion regarding the influence of other disasters on conflict, as shown by my previous publications. In the future, I would hope that all of our work in this area would properly represent the already existing literature.

Yours sincerely,

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