

Debate



Disaster Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region

Background

After the 2003 earthquake disaster in Bam, Iran, a headline in the UK newspaper *The Independent* proclaimed, 'Human tragedy forces US to rethink hard line.' Just over a year later, a headline in the *Christian Science Monitor* referring to the 2004 disaster in Sri Lanka enquired, 'Peace dividend from tsunami?'. These news stories support the growing interest in the concept of 'disaster diplomacy' (www.disasterdiplomacy.org). Disaster diplomacy explores how and why disaster risk reduction—both pre-disaster including prevention and mitigation and post-disaster including response and recovery—do and do not lead to peace and cooperation.

Three types of Asia-Pacific scenarios have been examined:

- A specific country or region that experiences disaster, such as North Korea's international relations following floods, droughts, and famines since 1995 and an April 2004 train explosion.
- A specific disaster event or type of disaster. The Bam earthquake had potential for improving US-Iran relations while Taiwan's 1999 earthquake suggested improvements in China-Taiwan relations. Neither led to long-lasting diplomatic outcomes.
- Other trans-boundary opportunities, such as international cooperation in identifying disaster casualties. Partly due to the large number of casualties from more affluent countries, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster set the stage for improved protocols regarding international disaster casualty identification.

All evidence so far suggests that disaster risk reduction rarely creates, but sometimes catalyses, diplomacy. For instance, the most successful tsunami diplomacy case study following the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster is Aceh's peace deal, but it had pre-tsunami origins and cannot be attributed solely to the tsunami disaster. More specifically, disaster risk reduction can, but does not always, have a short-term impact on diplomacy. But over the long-term, non-disaster factors such as leadership and historical grievances have a more significant impact on diplomacy than factors related to disaster risk reduction.

Changing the priority of disaster risk reduction

Many reasons explain why disaster risk reduction sometimes has less diplomatic influence than might be expected or hoped for. Reconciliation is not necessarily an important objective, irrespective of disaster risk reduction's advantages. Similarly, diplomacy may be used to cover hidden political and economic interests as has been suggested for American and Turkish interventions in Aceh following the 2004 tsunami.

Inertial prejudice, misgivings, and mistrust can overcome disaster diplomacy efforts, as demonstrated by the conflict over aid in post-tsunami Sri Lanka and India. As another example, the U.S. initially did not respond to Iran's aid offers following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Additionally, lack of political forethought and media hype can derail good intentions. That was the case when the American government tried to send a high-profile emissary with supplies to Bam following the 2003 earthquake disaster.

Denying that international assistance is needed allows countries to avoid having to accept external resources—meaning that no basis exists for even attempting disaster diplomacy. With lingering memories of the failed Bam-related earthquake diplomacy, Iran declined an American offer of aid following the February 2005 earthquake disaster which killed over 600 people in southern Iran. Iran stated that they could handle the disaster domestically, yet aid was accepted from several other countries and international organizations.

These observations suggest that neither domestic nor international disaster risk reduction are inevitably a high political priority, even after a disaster or when goodwill is present. Other factors tend to be more important for political decision-making, although the efforts of UN/ISDR and other organizations are slowly changing such views to make disaster risk reduction a higher priority.

Within these successes, should disaster risk reduction be directly linked to peace and diplomacy efforts? Opposing answers emerge:

No. Extensive effort occurs to divorce disaster risk reduction from politics and to make it a normal and accepted process rather than depending on political whims. New mechanisms for relating disasters and politics are not needed. Instead, encouraging further separation would be preferable.

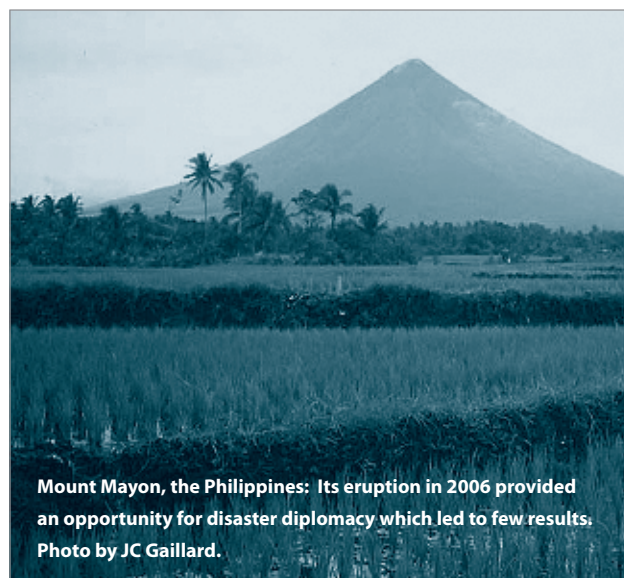
Yes. Disasters are inherently political events and disaster risk reduction is fundamentally a political and social, not a scientific



Infanta, Quezon, the Philippines showing damage following the late-2004 typhoon disaster. Photo by JC Gaillard.



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Mount Mayon, the Philippines: Its eruption in 2006 provided an opportunity for disaster diplomacy which led to few results. Photo by JC Gaillard.

Tsunami damage in Banda Aceh, Aceh, Indonesia.
Photo by Joseph Ashmore.



In Aceh, a stranded village with roads leading nowhere due to widespread flooding and land displacement.
Photo by Elizabeth Babister.



A jail, south of Meulaboh, Aceh where all 500+ prisoners, many of them militants, and staff were killed by the tsunami. Photo by JC Gaillard.



or technical, process. The more positive outcomes from disaster-related activities which could be fostered, the better. Such outcomes should be actively pursued rather than taking the naïve stance of trying to extract politics from disaster risk reduction.

Political construction of disaster

The Philippines is a useful case study for indicating the inextricable links between disaster risk reduction and politics with regards to disaster diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. From November–December 2004, four typhoons struck Quezon province killing over 1,000 people through floods and mudslides in areas with a long-standing guerrilla conflict led by the New People's Army (NPA).

Illegal logging was quickly identified as one of the causes of the devastating slope failures and floods. The Filipino government promptly associated the illegal logging with the NPA. The Filipino opposition blamed the government for not tracking down the loggers and for contributing to the environmental damage. The opposition even suggested the death penalty for the loggers.

Rather than grasping the opportunity to tackle the long-standing conflict and illegal logging simultaneously as part of long-term disaster risk reduction, peace, development, and environmental management, the government sought to shift blame and to inflame the NPA. Fanning the NPA conflict occurred while the parallel conflict with Muslim separatists in the south had cooled down, almost as if the government were seeking a conflict somewhere, perhaps to bury the opposition's claims of new evidence for governmental corruption and incompetence. Both sides have media allies promoting their arguments. Instead of disaster diplomacy, this event became politically constructed by the government, the opposition, and the media around the alleged responsibility of nature, illegal loggers, and the NPA.

Two other flood disasters plus two volcanic eruptions in the Philippines in 2006 displayed some similar characteristics regarding the political construction of the disaster. In fact, firefights occurred between the NPA and the government's soldiers during relief operations. Conversely, these events also led to proposals for and declarations of ceasefires, sometimes from the government and sometimes from the NPA. Yet no scope for longer-term peace was suggested and longer-term peace outcomes were not witnessed. Disaster produced short-term, not long-term, diplomatic dividends.

The Philippines, as with post-tsunami Aceh and Sri Lanka, present intra-state disaster diplomacy, where internal conflicts within sovereign states are involved. Other case studies mentioned—North Korea, U.S.–Iran following Bam and Katrina, and China–Taiwan following the 1999 earthquake—are inter-state disaster diplomacy where two or more sovereign states are negotiating. Are there disaster diplomacy differences between inter-state and intra-state case studies?

Despite some marked disparities amongst the conflicts examined, minimal disaster diplomacy difference is found between the two groups. Based on the evidence available, with regards to disaster risk reduction, non-state groups such as rebel organizations and non-sovereign jurisdictions can be as important in local, national, and international affairs and conflict resolution as state governments. That is not always true, but it often happens, even with wide

variations amongst the form of conflict, diplomacy, and disaster risk reduction. Frequently, a conflict-inducing political construction of disaster is the result, to the detriment of disaster diplomacy.

Hope for disaster diplomacy?

Such complex interactions and the lack of rules for disaster diplomacy case studies suggest that disaster diplomacy outcomes are never certain. Disaster diplomacy can actually be a distraction by:

- Raising expectations which cannot be met immediately, leading to disillusionment, impatience, and ammunition for opponents of reconciliation or disaster risk reduction.
- Avoiding the long-standing root causes of enmity.
- Failing to implement the long-term measures necessary for building and maintaining confidence in peace and in disaster risk reduction.
- Disaster diplomacy can instead produce a quick fix which is expected to solve all disaster and diplomacy problems. In reality, successful disaster risk reduction and peacemaking are long-term endeavours which must be integrated into development and sustainability processes.

Absence of evidence, however, is not evidence of absence. A successful example of new, lasting diplomacy based on only disaster risk reduction may yet emerge. However unsuccessful the notion seems to be at present, the option always exists of actively pursuing disaster diplomacy, irrespective of the drawbacks and the chance of failure, rather than passively sitting back and watching events unfold.

If that choice is made, the depth and long-term characteristics of both diplomacy and disaster risk reduction must be accepted from the beginning and never forgotten. Otherwise, disaster diplomacy could make the diplomatic and disaster situations worse than before it was attempted. ■

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Can preparedness pay? Recovery and mitigation expenditure as political investment

During the past 15 years, India has suffered five major earthquakes, four major cyclones, severe floods annually, regional drought every 2-3 years, an avalanche, and a tsunami. Every year, over 4000 lose their lives in disasters, 2.36 million houses are damaged, and 1.42 million ha. of agricultural land. This amounts to a value some Rs. 25,000 crores, equivalent to 2% of annual GDP. The World Bank and Government of India estimated the disaster loss caused by the Tsunami to be in the region of \$1.5 bn.

Diversion of Funds

The costs associated with disaster response and recovery divert development funds, decrease industrial output, and prompt the emergency and distress sales of public and private assets. Additionally, there are numerous indirect costs associated with disaster such as increases in cases of malnutrition and school dropouts. The psychosocial effects of disasters upon victims are immeasurable.

The costs of recovery and reconstruction are not just significant in monetary and human terms, but also in other non-monetary terms - the opportunity to develop brought by disaster is seldom seized by those involved in facilitating reconstruction.

Additionally, disaster related costs are not just short-term in nature and cannot all be met by reconstruction expenditure. Costs to the well-being of the population and to the health of the nation's economy are long-term in nature, difficult to quantify, and not easily redressed in disaster response measures.

Cost-benefit analysis of mitigation measures

Through mitigation measures, natural hazards can be prevented from turning into natural disasters, and long-term costs can be minimized. The costs and benefits of preparedness, risk transfer and mitigation activities are relatively straightforward to calculate. For example, the private and social costs of reinforcing a school building according to earthquake codes are easily identifiable; these costs include human and capital resources (materials), time costs, and the costs associated with disruption. The private and social benefits are also discernible - the economic benefits of undertaking the work, and the benefits associated with improved safety for the school and local communities.

If we compare the cost of improving the fire safety of the school with the costs associated with a fire damaging the school, and the