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Disaster Diplomacy: Hope Despite Evidence?

by Ilan Kelman on November 9, 2006

Background

In the aftermath of an immense 2003 earthquake disaster in the Iranian city of Bam, a headline in 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 inquired, "Peace dividend from tsunami?". These news stories hint at growing interest in the concept of "disaster diplomacy" (<http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org>). Disaster diplomacy explores whether or not disaster-related activities--both pre-disaster efforts including prevention and mitigation and post-disaster actions including response and recovery--induce international cooperation amongst countries or communities in adversarial constellations. We can examine several types of scenarios:

- A specific geographic region that experiences disaster, such as North Korea's international relations following floods, droughts, famines, and an April 2004 train explosion.
- A specific disaster event or type of disaster. Tsunami diplomacy had potential in many countries following the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, but the most successful outcome thus far--the nascent peace deal in Aceh--had pre-tsunami origins and cannot be attributed solely to the tsunami's aftermath.
- Other transboundary 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.



Tsunami damage in Banda Aceh, Aceh, Indonesia
 photo: Joseph ashmore

All evidence so far suggests that, while disaster-related activities do not create fresh diplomatic opportunities, they can catalyze action. A review of case studies reveals the following outcomes:

- In the short-term, disaster-related activities can, but do not always, have an impact on diplomacy.
- Over the long-term, non-disaster factors (such as leadership change, distrust, belief that an historical conflict or grievance should take precedence over present-day humanitarian needs, or priorities for action other than conflict resolution and diplomatic dividends) have a more significant impact on diplomacy than disaster-related activities.
- Disaster-related activities sometimes have the opposite outcome: they can exacerbate conflict and reduce diplomacy.

Disaster diplomacy also investigates the theory and trends behind these observations. It seeks to explain how governments and other actors choose different approaches in devising disaster-related activities to support or inhibit diplomatic processes. Other typologies of disaster diplomacy have focused on the influence of the proximity of countries involved in disaster diplomacy and their aid relationships and interactions.

Niche variants of the central disaster diplomacy theme exist as well. "Environmental diplomacy" looks at the non-environmental diplomatic outcomes associated with the negotiation and implementation of international environmental agreements. And "disaster para-diplomacy" explores disaster diplomacy for non-sovereign jurisdictions such as Queensland, Toronto, or Montserrat--sub-national entities that interact directly with foreign governments or international organizations for disaster-related activities.

Low Priority of Disaster-related Activities

There are multiple reasons that explain why disaster-related activities sometimes have less diplomatic influence than might be expected or hoped for:

- Reconciliation is not necessarily an important objective, despite the potential for joint life-saving disaster-related activities. In the case of Cuba and the United States, mutual enmity bolsters the power base of Cuba's leader Fidel Castro and many anti-Castro U.S. politicians.
- Inertial prejudice, misgivings, and mistrust can overcome disaster diplomacy efforts, as demonstrated by the conflict over aid in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. Similarly, Cuba refused U.S. assistance during a 1998 drought while the United States initially did not respond to Cuba's, Venezuela's, and Iran's aid offers following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.
- Lack of political forethought and media hype can derail good intentions. This was the case when the American government tried to send a high-profile emissary with supplies to Bam, Iran, following the 2003 earthquake disaster.
- Denying that international assistance is needed allows countries to avoid having to accept external resources--so 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 Algeria, Australia, China, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and several international organizations.



Hotel destroyed in the 8 October 2005 earthquake, Muzafarabad, Pakistan
 photo: Joseph ashmore

These observations suggest that neither domestic nor international disaster-related activities 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--which is hardly an innovative or surprising result.

Is There Any Hope for Disaster Diplomacy?

The humanitarian imperative demands that disaster-related activities be conducted neutrally and independently, irrespective of political distractions such as diplomatic disagreements. This seems to fly in the face of the concept of disaster diplomacy. However, the humanitarian imperative is frequently disregarded in reality.

If an opportunity to earn both disaster-related and diplomatic dividends arises, by linking them, should that opportunity be grasped? Should disaster-related activities be used to induce cooperation amongst adversarial states? Observers offer two opposing responses:

- No: Extensive effort occurs to divorce disasters from politics. New mechanisms for relating disasters and politics are not needed. Instead, encouraging further separation would be preferable.
- Yes: Disasters are inherently political events and it is naïve to think otherwise. The more positive outcomes from disaster-related activities which could be fostered, the better. Such outcomes should be actively pursued.

Given this debate, why does disaster diplomacy nonetheless enjoy such a high profile, especially in the media after a major event? Part of the hope--or, as the case may be, the loss of hope--lies in the multitudes of actors involved, beyond politicians and diplomats:

- The media and humanitarian organizations tried, but failed, to push drought diplomacy during the Eritrea-Ethiopia war which started in 1998.
- Popular desire can overcome diplomatic hesitancy, as shown by the push for linking mutual assistance to rapprochement following the 1999 earthquake disasters in Greece and Turkey.
- Events can overtake leaders, as seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Judging by the U.S. government's initially contradictory and inadequate response to foreign aid offers, it did not seem to have occurred to U.S. leaders that (a) the U.S. would ever need external post-disaster assistance and (b) that foreign countries would ever proffer it. In contrast, New Zealand's "Proposed National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan" from 2005 includes a section on post-disaster international assistance.
- On the other hand, where there are hopes for disaster diplomacy, the disproportionate influence of certain lobby groups on foreign policy may yield different outcomes. For example, anti-Castro Cuban-Americans vociferously oppose any reconciliation between the U.S. and Cuban governments while Castro is at Havana's helm.

As this last example suggests, we cannot entirely discount the influence of government leaders and, indeed, personalities are frequently defining factors in disaster diplomacy. Fidel Castro, for example, solidifies his power by maintaining the United States as an adversary. In the wake of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake disaster, Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf, military leader and now President, appeared to take many political steps on his own initiative towards peacemaking with India, including the initial post-earthquake phone call to offer assistance.

Given the various influences and factors discussed above, analyses of complex disaster-related and diplomatic processes should avoid being mechanistic, and should not assume inevitable consequences: a set of initial disaster and diplomacy conditions does not necessarily prescribe an exact disaster diplomacy trajectory.



A tsunami-damaged temple in Sri Lanka

The Disaster Diplomacy Process

Disaster diplomacy is best viewed as a complex process, not an either-or proposition. Disaster-related activities are but one factor among many in the minefield of inter-state relations. Others include trade diplomacy, sports diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and even--as seen when outgoing Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi visited the United States in 2006--Elvis diplomacy. Whether in the pursuit of disaster-related objectives or other goals, new diplomacy will happen only if it is actively supported or lobbied for by actors such as political leaders, the media, popular will, or non-political heavyweights. Disaster diplomacy can be either adopted or avoided by choice.

The outcomes of disaster diplomacy processes are never certain. Advocates or opponents of disaster diplomacy may be ignored by political leaders. Meanwhile, leaders attempting reconciliation via disaster diplomacy run the risk of being rebuffed and embarrassed by the other side.

Disaster diplomacy's popularity, then, is undeserved. In fact, the hope and popularity it receives has been a factor in its failure by:

- Raising expectations which cannot be met immediately, leading to disillusionment, impatience, and ammunition for contrarians.
- Distracting from the long-standing root causes of enmity.
- Failing to account for long-term measures necessary to build and maintain confidence in peace.

Instead, a quick fix is sought to solve all disaster and diplomacy problems, even though successful disaster risk reduction and peacemaking are long-term endeavors which need to be integrated into development and sustainability processes.

Absence of evidence, however, is not evidence of absence. A successful example of new diplomacy based on only disaster-related activities 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.

Ilan Kelman's main research and advocacy work relates to disaster diplomacy, how disasters do and do not bring together enemy states, and island vulnerability, building safe and healthy communities on small islands and other isolated areas. More details are available at <http://www.ilankelman.org>.