

Rationale for Military Involvement in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Deon V. Canyon, PhD, DBA, MPH, FACTM;¹ Benjamin J. Ryan, MPH, PhD;¹
Frederick M. Burkle, Jr., MD, MPH, DTM, FAAP, FACEP²

1. Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, Hawaii USA
2. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts USA; Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC USA

Correspondence:

Deon V. Canyon, PhD, DBA, MPH, FACTM
Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
2058 Maluhia Rd
Honolulu, Hawaii 96815-1949 USA
E-mail: deoncanyon@gmail.com

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Abbreviations:

AMRG: ASEAN Militaries Ready Group
ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations
HADR: humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
MNCC: Multinational Coordination Center

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Abstract

Good relations and trust are the foundation of soft power diplomacy and are essential for the accomplishment of domestic interventions and any bilateral or multilateral endeavor. Military use for assistance and relief is not a novel concept, but it has increased since the early 1990s with many governments choosing to provide greater numbers of forces and assets to assist domestically and internationally. The increase is due to the growing lack of capacity in global humanitarian networks and increasingly inadequate resources available to undertake United Nations humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions. In response, the military has been more proactive in pursuing the improvement of military-to-military and military-to-civilian integration. This trend reflects a move towards more advanced and comprehensive approaches to security cooperation and requires increased support from the civilian humanitarian sector to help meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Military assistance is progressing beyond traditional methods to place a higher value on issues relating to civil cooperation, restoring public health infrastructure, protection, and human rights, all of which are ensuring a permanent diplomatic role for this soft power approach.

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Introduction

The demand for natural-disaster-related humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) is highest in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.¹ Over the past 15 years, the Americas, Africa, and Europe have experienced stable or declining weather-related disasters, while those living in Oceania and Southeast Asia have experienced a disproportionate and increasing number of weather-related disasters.² In this region, the number of people affected by disasters and associated costs continue to rise, and increasing human population densities are certain to ensure this trend continues.³ The growing lack of capacity in global humanitarian networks to cater for people in need,⁴ and reducing resources available to undertake United Nations HADR missions,⁵ place pressure on governments to find an alternative, more effective way to provide HADR for exposed and vulnerable populations. Regardless of the United Nations stipulation that military assets should be used only as a last resort in responding to natural disasters, the use of militaries to fill this gap has become standard practice, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, and, as predicted, this is increasing globally.^{6–8}

Military engagement in disaster assistance and relief is not a novel concept, but it has increased since the early 1990s with many governments choosing to assist domestically and internationally by providing greater numbers of military forces and assets.⁹ Growing attention to human rights and related laws has paved the way for a reduction in skepticism relating to the use of militaries in humanitarian situations. This is especially true for collaborative civilian-military approaches to the management of sudden-onset natural disasters and public health emergencies of international concern, such as the West African Ebola epidemic (2014), but remains a work in progress for more complex humanitarian emergencies associated with conflict and war. Thus, there are low suspicions about military provision of humanitarian aid in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, where the militaries of most nations are historically vital and a central part of disaster response, and nongovernmental organizations hesitate to work with the military in the European-African axis where suspicions of political interference run high.¹⁰

Critics of military involvement in HADR state that it is “inefficient, inappropriate, inadequate, and expensive; contrary to humanitarian principles; and driven by political imperatives rather than humanitarian need.”⁹ However, in the humanitarian literature, there are few studies that support these assertions and even fewer that support more important contentions that military HADR activities are inappropriate or they have placed civilian populations or humanitarian staff at greater risk.¹¹ Thus, this paper explores 14 current rationales for military provision of HADR.

Report

Increasing Military Budgets

The first generic benefit skeptics often highlight is that HADR involvement justifies the maintenance, or even increase, in military budgets during periods of decreasing monetary investment.⁹ This can take the form of diversification of military endeavors into other areas of need, such as HADR, where the military has clear capabilities. An example of this was the rapid engagement of Japan’s Self Defense Forces in response to the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident. This action attracted wide-spread public accolades and may have contributed to broader support that increased spending on international military HADR.^{12,13} Some would rightly argue that this is putting the cart before the horse, so realistically, it should appear much lower on anyone’s list of reasons for supporting military HADR.

Expanding Soft Power Diplomacy

A secondary argument used by critics, which is also the most common argument used by proponents, is that the provision of assistance generates significant goodwill towards the military, which can smooth the way for other non-humanitarian alliances, activities, and interventions. The use of military assets in HADR has always been strategic, and there is no deception.¹⁴ Good relations are the foundation of soft power diplomacy and are essential for the accomplishment of domestic interventions and any bilateral or multilateral endeavor. Military involvement in HADR and helping people in desperate need is one of the most effective methods used to generate goodwill and demonstrate that a nation’s military is a righteous and good force.¹⁵

The People’s Liberation Army (People’s Republic of China) are latecomers to this endeavor with just over one-dozen international aid missions under the belt. Their efforts lack engagement, coordination, and sophistication, and are reminiscent of aid efforts conducted by competent countries over 20 years ago. They are learning the value of a “hearts and minds” approach, so there is little doubt that their good intentions will morph over time as they rapidly improve. Another examples of hearts and minds efforts include the US pacification campaign designed to win the populace over to the side of the South Vietnamese government following the invasion of Vietnam (1955-1975), as well as the effort to win Iraqi support following the US invasion during the Gulf War (1990-1991).¹⁴ More recent examples of military HADR operations that highlighted US “goodness,” confirmed the usefulness of its presence, and tempered public perceptions were the 2011 Operation Tomodachi (Friend) in Japan and the 2013 Operation Damayan in the Philippines. Expanding soft power diplomacy in this manner cannot be under-estimated when it comes to countering a loss of influence to China in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.¹⁶

These days, the phrase “hearts and minds” is used pejoratively, to signify the heavy-handed use of US military resources to influence

public opinion in foreign countries. There is some truth to this, for in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (2013), humanitarian aid to the Philippines by the US government enhanced public opinion of the US among Filipinos. Within six months of the typhoon, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Act, allowing the US military access to facilities in the Philippines, stationing of troops, and prepositioning of weaponry, was signed by President Obama and President Aquino in April 2014.¹⁷

Mil-Mil Relations

Responding to disasters and engaging with the militaries of different countries through new multinational constructs, such as the Multinational Coordination Center (MNCC), provides the opportunity to gain common understandings and build advanced security cooperation relations. The MNCC coordinates bilateral assistance, by participating multinational force militaries, multilaterally on the ground to achieve unity of effort and avoid duplication of assistance during disaster response. The Philippines were the first to use the MNCC in a significant manner. For instance, although the US and other responders maintained their operational bases in the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan, they worked alongside military forces from other countries and developed awareness of commonalities, differences, and limitations in each other’s operating systems. Maintaining or developing presence in the Indo-Asia-Pacific regions requires opportunities like this to build trust and forge stronger military-to-military ties.¹⁶

When Super Typhoon Hagupit arrived (2014), the MNCC was better prepared and ready to manage in-bound multinational military assets because it was nested under a broader national HADR architecture to compliment other HADR structures.¹⁸ Needs assessments were based on clear requirement reports from civilian response clusters, and the early establishment of the MNCC reduced the time lag that affected Typhoon Haiyan coordination.

The advancement of US military goals in the Indo-Pacific region through the use of humanitarian and disaster efforts is, by design, not accident. For two years before Typhoon Haiyan, Balikatan (the annual joint exercises between the Philippines and US militaries) had focused on disaster relief scenarios, and the rapid deployment of US military assets had been planned and tested. Following deployment of the US military HADR mission, representatives of government-policy-oriented US think tanks highlighted the benefits for the US in building ties between militaries and state assets.¹⁹

To take this further in a proactive manner for the benefit of HADR in the region, the US needs to identify countries with which it may engage in HADR and develop bilateral agreements and standard operating practices to ensure future responses go smoothly and generate the desired soft power and goodwill.

Using HADR to Maintain Deployments

It has been asserted that some countries use HADR to justify increased military deployments in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.¹⁵ However, this is an unsubstantiated claim since most countries in North and Southeast Asia have well-developed HADR systems and capabilities, and while foreign militaries are often the first responders in Oceania and some of the other sub-regions, they typically want to leave in two to three weeks to minimize costs. Increased military deployment in the region by the US was due to the Pacific Pivot and then the Rebalance, which both were general security strategies of which HADR was only one part.

National Strategic Culture

National strategic culture strongly influences a government's decision to support international HADR and to commit military forces and assets in response to crises. This culture derives from national policies that derive from perceptions concerning the role of militaries in society.²⁰ The degree to which these militaries engage, the assets they mobilize, and the tasks they undertake to provide support to the afflicted are all influenced by societal conceptions of military duties in serving communities of interest. Some countries offer advice, training, imagery, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Others send funds, material goods, and/or troops, and this continues all the way up to the commitment of large military assets, such as planes, military troops, and hospital ships.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN; Jakarta, Indonesia) member states routinely deploy military forces as the primary responders and managers of disasters. Seventy percent of Asia-Pacific countries have historically used their military as the primary disaster response organization. The provision of foreign military forces and assets is the primary response to government-to-government requests for assistance throughout the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Recent experiences in large disaster events, such as Typhoon Haiyan, prompted ASEAN to develop the concept of a Multinational Military Coordination Center, which has now been successfully implemented in the Philippines. It provides a structure to manage multiple foreign military responders. Currently, efforts focus on addressing a lack of preparedness, training, and capacity to provide HADR gap by responding militaries. An expert working group of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting is in the process of developing the concept of an ASEAN Militaries Ready Group (AMRG) to prepare a multinational joint military force for rapid, coordinated deployment to crisis zones. The AMRG concept, deriving from a national strategic culture, provides an opportunity for ASEAN to become a global leader in the multinational coordination of military responses to HADR.

Testing Systems

Militaries possess a broad-range of capabilities that can be engaged in HADR missions. Some of these include rapid assessment, temporary communications, airport function, air and sealift, logistics management, engineering support, medical assistance, and environmental health. Exercises fail in many ways to provide realistic training and test operational processes and practices. This failure is due to the difficulty of accurately representing the reality of any crisis, which includes fluctuating and rippling threats, unpredictability, and urgency. Natural disasters offer the best opportunity to test equipment, processes, systems, authority structures, interagency arrangements, and information sharing in real-life situations.

The provision of military HADR forces to other countries not only reinforces relationships, it provides opportunities to test mutual national security protocols and increase knowledge of military operational capabilities.²¹ Unfortunately, military engagement thus offers opportunities for foreign agencies to observe current military practices, which explains military reluctance to fully cooperate in multinational response endeavors.

Gaining Experience

Most senior military leaders are aware of the need to have experienced personnel in charge of HADR planning and operations. The potential negative consequences associated with a failed

international intervention are far-reaching and can throw an organization into crisis.²² Experience comes from formal training and on-the-job experiences that prepare leaders to manage crises. Training should include mock drills, simulations, and hands-on roles in large-scale field exercises. However, crisis leaders should ideally have extensive field experience upon which to draw.²³ The prevention, preparedness, response, and reconstruction phases of crisis management involve difficult decisions due to persistent tensions between the expectations and the realities of crisis leadership.²⁴ Since opportunities for military HADR intervention occur regularly, the deployment of potential leaders under the command of a field-experienced leader is an excellent method for building experiential leadership capacity for future operations in HADR.

Reinforce Alliances and Partnerships

Joint military exercises enhance interoperability, strengthen partnerships, and improve disaster response and counterterrorism capabilities. The Balikatan training exercise between the Philippines and the US, and the Disaster Management Exercise between China and the US, are long-running examples of bilateral military HADR cooperation. These exercises test various operational approaches, which ensures a more efficient and faster response to natural and man-made crises. In 2017, a component of the Balikatan exercise practiced ship-to-shore movement of military personnel and equipment, air operations, and aid distribution to bolster disaster response capabilities.²⁵

Military HADR responses build confidence and trust, which lead to a "qualitative enhancement of military coalitions and partnerships, and possibly even the cooptation of non-alliance nations into military exercises and exchanges."²⁶ This exemplifies how to transform soft power advances into hard power entities, which one has to argue, despite good intentions, might backfire. Indeed, any one country's soft power can be interpreted by another as hard power. In response to the region's needs and to these concerns, Singapore established the Changi Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Coordination Centre (RHCC) in 2014 to facilitate foreign military coordination in support of an affected state's military.²⁷

Crisis Containment

Damage containment is a primary crisis management strategy, and while it originated from the hazard control sector, it is applicable in a broader HADR sense. One of the negative consequences of large and frequently occurring disasters is that they displace populations seeking assistance or a better life. Affected populations living in weak or unstable nations have the potential to cross national boundaries into more stable environments. Large refugee flows always have substantial impacts that include economic, environmental, social, health, public health, and, at times, political difficulties.²⁸

The presence of internally displaced people and externally displaced refugees places demands on economies, services, and infrastructure and can have negative impacts on local populations. Refugees can even impact the development efforts of a host country and their effects, such as deforestation for firewood and subsequent environmental damage, may be felt long after the problem is resolved. In this regard, even developed countries, such as the US, can take preventative action by assisting Caribbean neighbors, who are highly exposed to natural disasters.¹⁶

Protection

In situations where populations become vulnerable or displaced due to a natural disaster or conflict, their protection and the protection

of humanitarian workers becomes an issue.^{29,30} Data from 2005 to 2015, available at aidworker.org, clearly show an upward trend in major attacks on aid workers that is of mounting concern. The traditional “law of war” protections simply do not exist anymore.³¹ As protection issues increase, HADR agencies less concerned with maintaining neutral status under international humanitarian law and more concerned with saving lives could be expected to partner with military forces to provide security and protective support.

Maintaining an International Image

In 2013, Brattberg argued that the US military was an “indispensable” partner in HADR and the “only” international actor capable of large-scale operations, such as the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.¹⁶ However, in 2008, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sweden) reported that while the US was the most proactive in making its military assets available for disaster response, many other nations deployed significant military assets and have done so for many years.¹⁹ For instance, a large proportion of the response to the 1999 severe flooding in Venezuela came primarily from Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay.³²

European countries usually deploy military assets in response to HADR requests, but only to non-European countries.¹⁹ In Europe, the Netherlands maintains the best records on military HADR missions, which show 18 deployments since 1997 to countries as distant as Suriname and Pakistan. European forces have deployed to support the 2000 floods in Mozambique, the 2003 earthquake in Iran, the 2004 floods in Haiti, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in Indonesia, the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir, the 2006 floods in Algeria, the 2010 floods in Pakistan, and the 2011 conflict in Libya.^{19,33} Even China had conducted 14 HADR operations supported by military assets in 12 countries by 2016.³⁴ There are many other examples of military HADR support by India, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, ASEAN, Singapore, Canada, and South Africa.¹⁹

Brattberg’s assertion that the “forceful US response” is “indispensable”¹⁶ was never a viable stance, and the US is becoming less indispensable as other countries embrace the soft power approach and step up their HADR efforts.

Building Trust to Work on More Delicate Issues like Human Rights

Practically speaking, military humanitarian engagements vary depending on the nature of the relationship with other nations and to what extent trust exists. Traditionally, assisting nation activities in low trust environments involves a lot more give than take. Once assisted nation capacities develop and the results of assistance become clear, trust emerges. China’s approach is somewhat different in that it provides assistance coupled with economic agreements and loans that have the potential to eventually render an assisted nation in great debt and subservient.³⁵ This fast-track-to-development approach appeals to base greed and envy in shortsighted politicians, and there does not appear to be any consideration of blatant human rights violations in recipient countries. Chinese concessional loans are typically allocated to transport and storage; energy generation and supply; and industry, mining, and construction.³⁶ However, there is little focus on local capacity building, which is apparent in the smaller allocations to health, general budget support, and education. Without a focus on using local resources and labor, and capacity building activities, in infrastructure and industrial projects, trust cannot be built, and in the

long term, this disingenuous approach can be destructive for domestic and international relations.

Preventing Economic Instability

Some academics have found that natural disasters may promote commercial growth by stimulating productivity in the corporate sector.^{37–40} Catastrophic crises may additionally encourage proactive improvements in technology innovation, policy change, and institutional redesign that increase economic resilience. Indeed, the recurrent nature of hydro-meteorological hazards, such as those in Bangladesh, encourages adaptation in economic and social activity.

However, some disaster impacts are less benign. Both short-lived events (such as tornadoes, storms, heatwaves, and earthquakes) that typically cause concentrated destruction, and longer-term events (such as droughts [in agricultural subsistence areas], hurricanes, and major floods) that spread damaging effects over a larger area, can and do have wide-ranging, severe negative short- and long-term macroeconomic consequences. Regions or countries that experience a high frequency of disasters also experience negative long-term consequences for economic growth, development, and poverty reduction.⁴¹

Rapid unsustainable urbanization and the growing number of people moving onto land with historically higher exposure to disasters are additional factors that ensure growth in the economic and human impact of disasters. For instance, forecasted rising seas may affect one-half of a billion people who have moved to low-lying urban areas for work.⁴²

Unfortunately, disasters have little impact on international aid and development donors who respond by reallocating resources and advancing commitments within existing multiyear country programs and budget envelopes.⁴⁰ Thus, government consideration of dedicated response budgets may be appropriate where economies are likely to be depressed by disaster impacts. Military HADR interventions can assist in preparedness planning, as well as in reducing the economic impact of a disaster by reducing the time needed for people and businesses in an affected area to recover from immediate effects.

Preventing Political Instability

Political instability is another impact occasionally attributed to large disasters; however, this association is usually made in situations also experiencing conflict. In a study using the model of conflict developed by the Political Instability Task Force (US), only marginal evidence was found to confirm that certain types of disasters are linked to the onset of political instability with pre-existing resilience being the strongest influencing factor.⁴³ The data suggested that natural disasters are more likely to become catalysts of political instability only in states that are already prone to conflict.

Discussion/Conclusions

The focus on the rationale for military involvement in HADR necessitated an approach that examined motive and strategy behind military actions and engagement in the region. It did not focus on actors external to the region or instances where military power violated humanitarian principles, perpetuated human rights atrocities, and exacerbate non-disaster-related security challenges in complex emergency situations. As such, the observations are mostly applicable to disaster situations uncomplicated by the parameters normally associated with complex emergencies.

When soft power is defined as the ability to shape the preferences of others,⁴⁴ it is clear that the approach of using military forces in HADR operations has proved effective over time, and a growing number of countries now support natural HADR efforts with military personnel and assets. The tension between civilian and military actors is a byproduct of the European wars, with militaries in most of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the US playing the role of the primary domestic instrument of disaster response.⁴⁵ Civil humanitarians are often alarmed at being associated with a military force, even in peacetime.⁴⁶ However, there is growing acceptance in the humanitarian community that military assets can play a useful role in HADR.⁹ Some of the factors behind this are: “post-cold war realignment, the professionalization of armed forces (the phasing out of conscription and a greater investment in individual soldiers’ training and salary), and a search for new roles as ‘forces for good’ or ‘humanitarian warriors.’”⁴⁷

Civil societies and foreign governments increasingly request assistance in diverse domestic and international civil environments from militaries with whom they have developed a trusting relationship. Rising involvement of the military in HADR presents humanitarian organizations with an opportunity and a responsibility to engage more strategically with the military to improve performance.⁹ In response to calls for improved performance, the military has been proactive in pursuing the improvement of military-to-military and military-to-civilian integration. This trend reflects a move towards more comprehensive and inclusive approaches to security cooperation. In this regard, the civilian humanitarian sector is lagging.

Humanitarian opportunities offer an educational window into the culture of the countries that is invaluable to the military, especially if in the future the military becomes involved in a conflict. General Petraeus said that the US had a flawed strategy in Vietnam that resulted in a failure to understand the adversary because it did not take into account the society in which it was fighting and did not fully comprehend the government it was

supporting.⁴⁸ Concerning Iraq, Gen Petraeus said, “What [we’re] dealing with is much more complex and much more nuanced than what we were trained to do when I was a captain. You have to understand not just what we call the military terrain . . . the high ground and low ground. It’s about understanding the human terrain, really understanding it.” In this regard, civil affairs in the military have fallen short in meeting that aspect of why they exist, and more is required to support soft power institutions and approaches.

At the forefront of humanitarian ethics stands Médecines Sans Frontières (Geneva, Switzerland). In 2006, the executive director of its US branch stated that it was not possible to coordinate civil-military HADR actions “without compromising the primary security function of the former or the independence of the latter.”⁴⁹ While this hardline stance is appropriate in conflict-ridden war zones, it is dated and nonsensical in non-conflict areas where disaster relief is the focus. This lack of integration and cooperation for the mutual benefit of suffering populations should, at the very least, be supported by evidence-based data that show a lack of utility in collaborative civilian-military relations.

Both strategic and humanitarian aims drive all parties that engage in military HADR. These two elements are conjoined and inseparable. As we advance into the future, the humanitarian community needs to identify paths of cooperation to engage with militaries, because they are not going away. Militaries need to progress beyond traditional assistance methods, such as heavy lift and rapid mobilization of assistance assets, to improve their usefulness and relevance. Areas for expansion might include synergistically improving cooperation with civil and commercial sectors, restoring public health infrastructure, working actively to protect the victims of human rights abuses, and protecting aid workers. All military, civil, and commercial sectors must maintain a sincere and concerted effort to coordinate and collaborate to ensure continuing benefits to diplomacy and populations in need.

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