

4th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS)

Berlin, 28-30 October 2009

A conference jointly organised by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, Federal Ministry of Defence, Berlin, and Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Jakarta

Discussion Paper

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Session V: Disaster Relief, Humanitarian Relief

Disaster Relief: Politics, Security Implications and Foreign Policy

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This paper aims to highlight some key characteristics of disaster relief operations in Asia, with a particular focus on the southern Asian region. The thrust of the paper is not so much at the mechanics of disaster relief as at the politics of disaster relief. That there is clearly politics – foreign policy interests and domestic factors of both donor and recipient nations – involved in humanitarian relief and assistance has been well documented.¹ In Asia certainly, as important as the aid itself is, is who provides it and how. As a continent of mostly developing countries it is inevitable that disaster-struck nations often find themselves short of the capacity required to deal with the aftermath. What capacity exists is usually state capacity, often acting through the agent of military forces rather than adequate civilian response. Often, there is foreign military support required as also the resources and capabilities of international NGOs (INGOs).

Beginning with a brief exercise in defining what constitutes disasters, the essay draws attention to three key factors affecting disaster relief operation in Asia – prestige or image issues, security implications and foreign policy goals.

Defining Disasters in Asia

Asia already has a high incidence of natural disasters and records the highest number of fatalities in the world from such disasters. Natural disasters as most commonly understood refer to sudden and massive impact events like earthquakes, cyclones and floods but the Asian continent also suffers from several slow onset, long-term maladies like droughts. There are other disasters too, that Asia is affected by such as technological disasters and what are called complex humanitarian emergencies (CHE), such as those induced by armed conflict, displacement or disease.² While technological disasters in Asia have remained few and far between (a prominent exception being India's Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984), these are only likely to grow in frequency in countries such as China and India characterized by breakneck economic growth without accompanying growth in technological and environmental safety mechanisms. Indeed, China's huge air, water, and soil pollution problem might be characterized as a technological and environmental disaster in the making. Still more important are the multitude of CHEs that exist in Asia but which do not garner as much attention as do natural disasters that cause immediate and large-scale destruction.

Against a backdrop of frequent natural disasters, and enough trouble dealing with these, it would seem unnecessary to complicate issues any further by the addition CHEs to the list and indeed, the focus of this paper is largely on natural disasters rather than disasters induced

¹ A Cooper Drury, Richard Stuart Olson, Douglas A Van Belle, "The Politics of Humanitarian Aid: U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, 1964-1995," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (May, 2005), pp. 454-473; D Suba Chandran et al, "India's Disaster Relief Diplomacy," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* (New Delhi), Vol. 4, No. 2, April-June 2009, pp. 63-80.

² For more on CHEs see Juha Auvinen and E Wayne Nafziger, "The Sources of Humanitarian Emergencies," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Jun., 1999), pp. 267-290.

or compounded by political factors and governance deficits. However, it is important to lay out a position here about CHEs in Asia, given that accompanying the ‘rise’ of the continent or that of its major powers, is the tendency also to deflect criticism by emphasizing a sort of Asian uniqueness or Asian way of doing things, and by referring to Asia as still being comprised of largely poor and developing countries. However, genocide, mass starvation, or suffering engendered by deliberate government policies of exclusion and apathy, too, need to be characterized as disasters with consequences for Asia and the world at large. Disaster relief operations whether in Asia or elsewhere, deal not just with the effects of the natural calamity itself but also to a significant extent with the effects of government apathy, callousness and inefficiency.

Meanwhile, part of the business of defining disasters, also has to do with the political salience of the event from the standpoint of a donor country’s foreign policy interests or from the coverage in its national media.³ The United States might be less constrained to react to every disaster in South Asia than India is, given the latter’s more vital foreign policy interests in its immediate neighbourhood. Further, whether within a country or among countries, quite apart from the severity of a disaster or the number of casualties, there might be a difference in the coverage and importance given to different disasters. For example, the Kashmir quake of 2005 attracted far more attention within Pakistan than the several quakes that have struck Baluchistan over the years. Similarly, it can be argued that Bangladesh’s regular cyclones are less newsworthy today than in the past⁴ and that its Cyclone Sidr in November 2007 did not capture as much world attention as did the May 2008 Cyclone Nargis in its neighbour, Myanmar. However, it is important not to overemphasize the point about coverage in the Asian media – where Asian governments are concerned, the media coverage of an international disaster is not likely to be as important a yardstick for allocation of disaster aid, as it is for Western governments.⁵

³ A Cooper Drury, Richard Stuart Olson, Douglas A Van Belle, “The Politics of Humanitarian Aid: U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, 1964-1995,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (May, 2005), pp. 458-459.

⁴ Of course, this has, plenty to do with the fact that casualties have been limited by the country’s constantly improving disaster warning and response system. Casualties from Cyclone Sidr were just under 3,500 according to official sources compared to Cyclone Nargis’ death toll which stood at 22,000 according to official government figures - in both instances, figures from international agencies marked the casualties several times higher – even though both storms were of nearly comparable intensity by the time they made landfall.

⁵ One article in the *New York Times* about an international disaster, has been found to be worth more in terms of US disaster aid than 1,500 casualties. See A Cooper Drury, Richard Stuart Olson, Douglas A Van Belle, “The Politics of Humanitarian Aid: U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, 1964-1995,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (May, 2005), p. 470.

Pride and Prejudice in Disaster Relief

Pride – or in other words, regime legitimacy and survival – plays a big part in the donation, acceptance and subsequent allocation of relief aid. One early example is the case of Ethiopian famine of the 1970s and 1980s, when successive American administrations faced the problem of providing aid without in the process also shoring up the hostile communist regime in Addis Ababa. Equally serious was the Ethiopian government's reluctance to accept aid on American terms because it would have meant a loss of political face to be seen as accepting aid from a government it was politically opposed to and had criticized.⁶

Cut to the present in Asia, Pakistan consistently refused Indian aid in the wake of the 2005 Kashmir quake which affected its side of the disputed territory to a greater degree, when clearly, the proximity, quality and quantum of Indian resources would have certainly have saved lives in the hundreds, if not more. India was prepared to provide aid and relief material through the Line of Control (LoC) and offer aerial support but Pakistan balked at both proposals. Aid that Pakistan received subsequently from international agencies came as too little, too late.

Similarly, the Myanmarese junta did not initially accept American aid and waited several days before allowing the first supplies of international aid from India into the country. The primary consideration for Myanmar's generals has been maintaining their control of and preeminence among the population as signified by such acts banning news items of relief efforts by local NGOs and INGOs and articles criticizing the government.⁷ Also, it does not seem to matter to the junta that even a year after Cyclone Nargis, relief and rehabilitation efforts remain extremely poor focused as it is on taming the various ethnic armies around the country in the run-up to what are no doubt going to be rigged general elections in 2010. The ASEAN, meanwhile, has decided to convene a post-Nargis Assistance Conference (PONAC) to raise over US\$100 million in funds to meet the needs of Cyclone Nargis survivors.⁸ While this is not to say that relief and rehabilitation efforts in the case of other countries do not suffer from inefficiencies, Myanmar is clearly a case apart in that it is evident that the junta values its own survival above the interests of its people.

While pride, understood in the sense of saving face, played a part in Pakistan rejecting relief aid from India, China seems to have matured in this respect, to such an extent that the very act of receiving foreign disaster relief in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake turned out to be a foreign policy achievement for it. Despite initial reluctance, China eventually allowed foreign rescue teams into the country and of special significance was the fact that for the first

⁶ Edward Kissi, "Beneath International Famine Relief in Ethiopia: The United States, Ethiopia, and the Debate over Relief Aid, Development Assistance, and Human Rights," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Sep., 2005), pp. 111-132

⁷ See D Suba Chandran et al, "India's Disaster Relief Diplomacy," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* (New Delhi), Vol. 4, No. 2, April-June 2009, p. 67.

⁸ Usa Pichai, "ASEAN to raise US\$ 103 million for post-Nargis activities," *Mizzima News*, 2 October 2009. <http://www.bnionline.net/news/mizzima/7155-asean-to-raise-us-103-million-for-post-nargis-activities.html>.

time since the end of World War II, China even received a Japanese military vessel to its shores that was carrying relief material.⁹ Given the long history of Western disaster relief aid to China before 1949¹⁰ and the massive cover-up that followed the devastating 1976 Tangshan earthquake, this is an extremely noteworthy development.

In the same vein, might be interpreted the performance of the government of a country like Bangladesh in times of disaster. During the 1998 floods, the most devastating in the country's history, the government was politically motivated to ensure effective disaster relief operations and aid distribution not only to prevent opposition parties from turning the situation to their advantage but also because of the accountability demanded by international donors.¹¹

At the other end of the scale is the fact that prejudice too, affects disaster relief operations. Four years on from the Kashmir quake, reconstruction and rehabilitation in POK are still far from complete with urban development plans for most towns, including the capital, Muzaffarabad and other important towns such as Bagh and Rawalakot yet to be implemented.¹² Rehabilitation efforts following the earthquake of late October 2008 in Ziarat in Baluchistan, are in a similar state.¹³ In Pakistan, the existence of the POK outside the constitutional structure (until August 2009) and the lack of voice for the Baluchis in the Punjabi-dominated political system, have clearly induced state apathy as to relief and rehabilitation efforts. Similarly, despite the fact that the tsunami of 2004 had caused maximum damage to the Tamil-dominated northeast of Sri Lanka, government authorities were reluctant to focus relief efforts on the region. This might mostly have had to do with the fact that the region was then under the control of the rebel LTTE (see below), but it might be contended that the ethnic element was a factor, too.¹⁴

Meanwhile, returning to Pakistan, Islamabad seems insistent on sticking to Chinese aid in POK, despite the high costs associated with it. While the Chinese government pledged a soft loan with a low 1.5 per cent interest rate for the reconstruction of Muzaffarabad, it was not until 2007 that the first MoUs were signed with Chinese companies to commence construction activities. A disagreement soon followed, however, with the Chinese companies demanding exorbitant overhead charges that would in effect substantially reduce the

⁹ This was the Japanese destroyer Sazanami. See Howard W French, "Japanese Warship Visits Chinese Port," *New York Times*, 25 June 2008,

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/25/world/asia/25china.html?_r=1&ref=asia&oref=slogin.

¹⁰ The history of this aid goes back to the early 19th century when time Christian missionaries first began operating in the country in large numbers. See Lennig Sweet, "American Cooperation in Disaster Relief in China," *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 9 (May 3, 1943), p. 92.

¹¹ Bimal Kanti Paul, "Relief Assistance to 1998 Flood Victims: A Comparison of the Performance of the Government and NGOs," *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 169, No. 1 (Mar., 2003), pp. 86-87.

¹² Tariq Naqash, "False promises," *Dawn*, 8 October 2009. <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/provinces/03-false-promises-ss-02>.

¹³ "Still hopeless," *Nation*, 9 October 2009. <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/Opinions/Editorials/09-Oct-2009/Still-hopeless>.

¹⁴ R Hariharan, "Tsunami: Politics of Relief In Sri Lanka," Paper No. 1226, South Asia Analysis Group, 21 January 2005. http://www.saaq.org/common/uploaded_files/paper1226.html.

quantum of ‘assistance’ the Chinese were providing. While work has finally started Pakistani observers expect fresh problems to crop up when the companies begin submitting their invoices.¹⁵

Security Implications

Security implications here are read in two senses. First, from the point of view of the national government affected by the disaster in terms of its fears about the country’s security interests being compromised during and following a disaster and second, from the point of view of external governments involved in aid donation or affected secondarily by the disaster and the relief operations that follow it.

The refusal by Pakistan to accept Indian helicopters as part of the disaster relief operations in POK during the Kashmir quake may be interpreted as an instance of an affected government’s security concerns trumping humanitarian considerations.¹⁶ The flip side to this particular incident was the negative reaction from both within mainland Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) to the perceived apathy of the Pakistani state that valued ‘national security’ above the lives of its people.¹⁷ In this case, Islamabad was clearly caught between a rock and a hard place as losing the goodwill of its Kashmiris could not be considered as enhancing its security interests either. The government under Gen. Pervez Musharraf, perhaps chose the less odious (to the Pakistani military) option under the circumstances.

In an earlier instance, in Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami, relief to Tamil victims in the island’s northeast was clearly affected by Colombo’s desire to prevent aid from falling into the hands of the LTTE. Of course, the LTTE too clearly intended to use the opportunity of international attention and relief operations to bolster its own resources and propaganda efforts against the Sri Lankan government.¹⁸

An additional internal security implication needs to be pointed out and that is the perceived threat faced from the operation of NGOs whether local or international. Given that

¹⁵ The Chinese have apparently demanded Pakistani Rs.270 million for a one-kilometre-long strip of road in Muzaffarabad when the highest per kilometre cost of any road project in the PoK, so far has been Pakistani Rs.40 million. Tariq Naqash, “False promises,” *Dawn*, 8 October 2009. <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/provinces/03-false-promises-ss-02>.

¹⁶ The Pakistani government however, declared itself willing to accept Indian choppers minus the pilots. “Pakistan to accept Indian choppers but without pilots,” *Dawn*, 17 October 2005. <http://www.dawn.com/2005/10/17/earthquake.htm>.

¹⁷ See Aamer Ahmed Khan, “Opening up Kashmir,” *BBC News*, 19 October 2005. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4357006.stm.

¹⁸ R Hariharan, Tsunami: Politics of Relief In Sri Lanka, Paper No. 1226, South Asia Analysis Group, 21 January 2005. http://www.saag.org/common/uploaded_files/paper1226.html and R Hariharan, “Sri Lanka Up Date: Part 1 Tsunami Relief, Peace Process & the War of the Tamils,” Paper No. 1316, South Asia Analysis Group, 2 April 2005. http://www.saag.org/common/uploaded_files/paper1316.html.

most Western relief is channeled through NGOs, rather than national governments¹⁹ and that most NGOs in Asia are run largely on money and resources from international agencies,²⁰ Western ‘designs’ are particularly feared and governments whether in New Delhi or in Naypyidaw or in Beijing, are suspicious of their activities, even if to differing degrees. India’s Ministry of Home Affairs is well-known for how it contrives to make life really difficult for INGOs and keeps a close watch on sources of funding for local NGOs. For countries like Myanmar, however, any NGO – domestic or international – is perceived as a threat to the rule of the junta and as was seen following Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the relief operations by INGOs was often hampered or heavily controlled by the government. Even individuals involved in relief work have been arrested²¹ and in other parts of the country, there has been little protection afforded to the personnel and property of INGOs.²²

However, the activities of certain kinds of NGOs do pose security threats, not so much for the relief work they undertake but because of their profile and declared aims. Just as armies are frequently at the forefront of relief operations, the world over, religious groups too, are often heavily involved in such operations owing to their resources and capacity for mobilization. In the case of the Kashmir earthquake, the most efficient post-disaster suppliers of rescue and relief on the Pakistani side have been the jihadi groups operating in the region against India. A similar instance was evident also in Gujarat, India, following the massive earthquake of January 2001, where volunteers of the Hindu right-wing organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), were among the first to start relief operations. While this in itself is unobjectionable, it is when such organizations use the mass base thus built, towards propagating bigotry, genocide and terrorism that the problem arises. The RSS was a prominent actor in the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat in 2002 and prominent among the jihadi groups operating in POK was the Jamaat-ud-Dawa, a front for the banned Islamist militant organization Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the terror attacks against Mumbai in India in November 2008. Not only did the latter work in close cooperation with the Pakistani Army in the relief operations – indeed, even international humanitarian agencies had to work with such groups – but the continued inefficiency and/or inability of the Pakistani state in

¹⁹ For instance, over half the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) funds is channeled through international organizations. See A Cooper Drury, Richard Stuart Olson, Douglas A Van Belle, “The Politics of Humanitarian Aid: U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, 1964-1995,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (May, 2005), p. 456, fn. 2.

²⁰ See Bimal Kanti Paul, “Relief Assistance to 1998 Flood Victims: A Comparison of the Performance of the Government and NGOs,” *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 169, No. 1 (Mar., 2003), pp. 78-79.

²¹ Pho Zaw, “Arrested Nargis donors not allowed to meet families,” *Mizzima News*, 24 September 2009. <http://www.bnionline.net/news/mizzima.html>.

²² For example, several aid workers are from the World Food Program (WFP), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), World Vision, Association of Medical Doctors of Asia (AMDA), Alliance for Reform and Democracy in Asia (ARDA), Asian Harm Reduction Network (AHRN) and Health-Unlimited from China have been caught in the crossfire between Myanmar junta troops and an ethnic group in the northeast. Hseng Khio Fah, “Aid workers still stranded in Laogai,” *Shan Herald Agency for News*, 3 September 2009. <http://www.bnionline.net/news/shan/6964-aid-workers-still-stranded-in-laogai.html>.

pursuing rehabilitation efforts in this region has meant that jihadi and Islamist groups are the only ones that can be credited with any success in this regard. These groups have, as a result, only become further entrenched in the region. Among the implications pointed out by the International Crisis Group, are the replacement of the POK's destroyed state educational institutions with madrassas run by Islamist agencies that would no longer follow the prescribed state educational syllabi and the erosion of the legitimacy of the hitherto active mainstream secular and nationalist political parties.²³

Thus, security implications can arise also from the point of view of external governments, from relief operations of particular groups. In the above instance, the implications for the Indian government of the radicalization of PoK can be imagined. However, there are other problems that may arise as well. One, there might be pressures created on a government in one country from the shift of populations or their continued poor socioeconomic conditions following a disaster and poor disaster relief operations in another country. If political relations between the governments involved are not in the best state, then the external government involved can suffer serious consequences. This is especially true in the case of CHEs. The 1971 Indo-Pak War that led to the creation of Bangladesh was induced by precisely such a humanitarian emergency, following the mass exodus of ethnic Bengalis from what was then East Pakistan into India. Similarly, the extended conflict in Afghanistan has created a substantial refugee population in Pakistan that has provided safe havens and recruits for radical Islamist activities across the border in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, today.

A more typical security implication for both the affected government and external governments arises from the use of the national armed forces in disaster relief operations. Especially in Asia, where bilateral relations are seldom at their best, the use of military forces in such operations provide pointers to their rapidity of mobilization and effectiveness, which in turn has implications for military planning and preparedness in the neighbourhood. What for example does the Indian Navy's rapid response across a wide swathe of the Bay of Bengal during the tsunami or the Chinese PLA's response during the Sichuan earthquake tell us of their respective capabilities?²⁴

From the point of the affected government, however, what might need to be considered is whether the military's frequent deployment in disaster relief operations affects its military operational preparedness. To some extent it is inevitable that a nation's military forces are among the first to be drawn into relief operations given their mobility and organization and

²³ See Jawad Hussain Qureshi, "Earthquake Jihad: The Role of Jihadis and Islamist Groups after the October 2005 Earthquake," *International Crisis Group*, 24 July 2006. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4270>. See also Tariq Naqash, "False promises," *Dawn*, 8 October 2009. <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/provinces/03-false-promises-ss-02>.

²⁴ For more on a potential PLA role in providing international disaster relief, see Drew Thompson, "International Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance: A Future Role for the PLA?" *China Brief*, Volume 8, Issue 11, 21 May 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4941&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=168&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4941&tx_ttnews[backPid]=168&no_cache=1).

in many instances, such a role is enshrined legally as part of their duties;²⁵ indeed, it can be no one's case that military forces anywhere in the world object to being called up for disaster relief efforts whether within the country or outside. Still, the question needs to be asked for instance, if China's susceptibility to natural or man-made disasters mean that the PLA's men and resources have to prepare specifically for yet another non-military role,²⁶ besides serving as the Party's army?²⁷

Yet another question might arise here about this role of the PLA as primarily an army of the Party rather than of the state – what effect, for example, did the very obvious deficiencies of civilian construction and by implication of corruption in the public sphere have for the morale of PLA soldiers and for their views of the Party-State?

Foreign Policy Interests

Besides humanitarian considerations (if at all), the foreign policy interests of donor governments play a big role in their disaster relief operations. Two major considerations include power projection and the improvement of bilateral ties.

Disasters can often provide the opportunity for countries to engage in subtle power projection as in when their militaries are made available to assist in disaster relief efforts. In the Indian Ocean region, this is especially true of the United States and India. For example, the Indian Navy's quick response in the wake of the tsunami of December 2004 to calls for assistance from as far apart as Sri Lanka and Indonesia was as much an exercise in signaling its reach and its capability in the region as it was of undertaking humanitarian relief. Similarly, the Chinese navy's participation in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia (which can only tangentially be referred to as a humanitarian relief operation) has such an aim. For both India and China, such operations are especially significant when viewed against an established naval presence such as the United States that has been engaging in relief operations in the Indian Ocean region for decades.

Of course, such projection is usually portrayed in diplomatic terms and even soft power projection. The US Navy's relief operations in Bangladesh following Cyclone Sidr might be

²⁵ See Carter L Burgess, "The Armed Forces in Disaster Relief," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 309, *Disasters and Disaster Relief* (Jan., 1957), p. 72.

²⁶ For more on the possibilities of the responsibilities and tasks of armed forces increasing in the aftermath of a disaster, see Carter L Burgess, "The Armed Forces in Disaster Relief," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 309, *Disasters and Disaster Relief* (Jan., 1957), pp. 71-79. Among the roles that were added to the US armed forces' plate, for example, following floods in the 1950s was the rehabilitation of industries – war reserves were pressed into service to enable industries resume production at the earliest, contracts were awarded to other than the lowest bidders, payments to contractors were speeded up, delivery dates extended and industrial clinics established (p. 77).

²⁷ While natural disasters strike often enough in India, too, and the Indian Army is inevitably at the forefront of relief operations, the more serious non-military role affecting the Indian Army operational capacity might be its deployment in counterinsurgency operations within the country, that are patently not within the rubric of any army's functions.

construed as an important diplomatic step, especially at a time when American standing among Muslim countries around the world was at a low.

Disasters in the neighbourhood also provide the opportunity, if governments are willing, for reconciliation both internal and external. The case of the Indonesian government and the Aceh rebel movement following the 2004 tsunami is a prominent example, and its importance is underscored by the fact that the tsunami's effects in Sri Lanka did not lead to any reconciliation between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Between countries too, limited reconciliation has come about in the wake of natural disasters. For example, the Kashmir quake despite showing up the strains in the Indo-Pak bilateral relationship also provided an opportunity for actions from both governments aimed at improving ties. The LoC was opened at several points allowing people from both sides to meet and India went so far as to allow several separatist leaders from the Kashmir Valley to visit POK. Perhaps more significantly, the quake hastened the decision by both governments to formally open a second point of contact on the LoC this time in the Jammu region, the first being in the Kashmir region.²⁸ There were reports of the Indian government allowing its troops to cross the LoC to help Pakistani troops and Pakistani to fly its relief helicopters through the no-fly zone along the LoC to access remote areas.²⁹

It must also be asked if the increasing talk recently of Washington engaging the junta in Myanmar does not stem in some small way from American perceptions of the continued humanitarian costs of not engaging with the regime, especially following Cyclone Nargis.

Often, the symbolism of disaster relief itself is all that is aimed for. While Indian assistance was crucial in the post-tsunami relief efforts to various countries, as it has been to Bangladesh in the wake of several cyclone disaster that have beset that country, or to a much lesser extent to Myanmar (due to the junta's own proclivities) following Cyclone Nargis, such assistance is not important for its volume or quality as much as it is for the act itself, where Indian aid to China following the Sichuan earthquake was concerned.

Of course, such efforts at improving relations can backfire or cut no ice, when the relationship is on the whole strained and plagued by deeper and long-standing problems and Sino-Indian relations again provide the example. There was a whole kerfuffle in the Indian print media about the alleged slight to its External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, during his visit to China when he was not able to meet Chinese premier Wen Jiabao – who had to rush off to Sichuan to oversee relief operations³⁰ – and when the Mukherjee also delivered relief supplies on behalf of the Indian government. Relations had already been

²⁸ D Suba Chandran et al, "India's Disaster Relief Diplomacy," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* (New Delhi), Vol. 4, No. 2, April-June 2009, p. 73.

²⁹ Zubeida Mustafa, "Will it affect the dialogue?" *Dawn*, 19 October 2005, <http://www.dawn.com/2005/10/19/op.htm#4>. See also FS Aijazuddin, "When death took the roll call," *Dawn*, 18 October 2005. <http://www.dawn.com/2005/10/18/op.htm>, Najmuddin A Shaikh, "Human concern comes first," *Dawn*, 26 October 2005. <http://www.dawn.com/2005/10/26/op.htm#4>.

³⁰ "Chinese snub or treat for Pranab? Question of protocol," *CNN-IBN*, 6 June 2008. <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/chinese-snub-or-treat-for-pranab-question-of-protocol/66677-3.html>.

tense over alleged Chinese incursions across the Sikkim boundary and because still earlier, China had at a summit of the BRIC countries in mid-May blocked Russia's proposal to express support for the bids of India and Brazil to permanent seats in the UN Security Council.³¹

Similarly, in 2007, India's efforts in to use post-Cyclone Sidr aid to retrieve its poor standing among the Bangladeshi public, suffered a setback from the sheer lack of coordination between government ministries in New Delhi. The promised Indian supplies of rice as aid to Bangladesh were held up at the border by Indian customs authorities believing a ban on rice exports to be in force. As a result, Bangladesh in fact, got another excuse to accuse India of being non-cooperative, and this despite the prompt assistance that the Indian Air Force and Navy had earlier delivered in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone.³²

Using disaster relief to improve relations with one country can, however, also create problems in other bilateral relationships. India has won itself no friends in the West, with respect to Myanmar, by consciously choosing to make no comments about the junta's efficacy in relief operations post-Nargis or even about its irresponsible conduct in not adequately warning its people of the coming cyclone and this despite have received warnings several days in advance from India. In fact, an Indian minister at a meeting of aid donors following Cyclone Nargis was not above declaring that emergency relief should not be affected by 'politics.'³³ Conceivably, India did not mind so much when China announced a relief package for Nepalese victims of flooding on the eve of the then Nepalese Prime Minister, Prachanda's visit to China in August 2008.³⁴ Incidentally, the said flood, which occurred at the India-Nepal border when an embankment of the Kosi River was breached, also caused massive devastation in the Indian state of Bihar, and was declared a national disaster by New Delhi. Perhaps, it was no coincidence that the Dalai Lama later made a substantial monetary contribution by way of aid to the government of Bihar.³⁵

Meanwhile, the flip side to using disaster relief as a foreign policy tool by large countries such as the United States, China or India is when the donor country is itself caught short in preparations for natural disasters or in reacting to them. Recent cases in point are Hurricane Katrina that hit the United States in August 2005, the Sichuan quake in China and India's

³¹ See D Suba Chandran et al, "India's Disaster Relief Diplomacy," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April-June 2009, p. 74.

³² See D Suba Chandran et al, "India's Disaster Relief Diplomacy," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April-June 2009, p. 70.

³³ See D Suba Chandran et al, "India's Disaster Relief Diplomacy," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April-June 2009, p. 72.

³⁴ "China provides \$50,000 flood relief to Nepal," *People's Daily*, 22 August 2008. <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6483739.html>. The visit of the Nepalese Prime Minister to China was an especial sore point for India because he had broken tradition by making his first foreign visit to Beijing instead of New Delhi, following his assumption of office.

³⁵ Phurbu Thinley, "Dalai Lama offers prayers and donation for Bihar flood victims," *Phayul*, 1 September 2008, <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=22719&article=Dalai+Lama+offers+prayers+and+donation+for+Bihar+flood+victims>.

Kosi floods as well as the October 2009 floods affecting much of south-central India. In fact, the Kosi disaster set off a blame game between New Delhi and Kathmandu, as to whose fault it was that the Kosi embankment was not properly maintained. For China too, questions have arisen as to whether the casualties in the Sichuan earthquake could have been fewer had building regulations been followed and corruption not occurred in the construction of school buildings. The global outpouring of sympathy for China must be set against the subsequent arrest of protesting parents of school children killed in the quake and the obvious official negligence and corruption that played a part in the disaster.

Conclusion

For the foreseeable future, governments – both national and foreign – are likely to be key players affecting the nature, pace and effectiveness of relief operations. Their policies and political interests are more important in the Asian context than the actual purveyors of relief on the ground. In the latter respect, given low civilian state capacity and poor disaster preparedness in most Asian countries, it is military forces that are likely to remain at the forefront of immediate relief operations following a natural disaster with NGOs assisting them or replacing them later for the long-term rehabilitation efforts required. Against this backdrop, the characteristic features of disaster relief operations on the Asian continent as outlined above need to be better understood in order to improve the efficacy of such operations.

Humanitarian aid following disasters has increasingly become important to American foreign policy, particularly post-Cold War, being used in failed or failing states and those in the midst of transitions of one kind or the other.³⁶ For the same reasons, rising powers such as China and India too, see logic in engaging in humanitarian assistance. However, some of the same dilemmas that afflict the United States, might eventually come to affect China and India, too. Primary among these, is the conflict between humanitarian values and political interests. What will queer the pitch still further is that the rapid rise in global stature and ambitions of these two countries also means that they will be called upon to deliver often in disasters in the neighbourhood and elsewhere and it might be that the demand made of them could be well above and beyond their means – not so much in terms of monetary resources or materiel but in terms of capacity for a sustained presence when they are themselves both still developing countries with huge administrative and socioeconomic problems of their own on the one hand and a high degree of susceptibility themselves, to natural disasters, on the other.

Nevertheless, this in no way suggests that either Beijing or New Delhi is going to stint in their attempts at outreach through disaster relief. As in all matters that have emerged previously, disaster relief is likely to be an arena of undeclared competition as well as

³⁶ A Cooper Drury, Richard Stuart Olson, Douglas A Van Belle, “The Politics of Humanitarian Aid: U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, 1964-1995,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (May, 2005), p. 455.

possibly cooperation between the two Asian giants. Indeed, it seems to make sense that disaster relief cooperation should function as a CBM between the militaries of the two countries and that joint exercises also include this component. Meanwhile, with the continuing global presence of the United States and the rise of a host of other middle powers, whether affluent or similarly politically ambitious, one might conclude that the politics of disaster relief and humanitarian relief is only likely to get more complex.