

India's Disaster Relief Initiatives: From Neighbourhood's First Responder to Regional Mobilizer

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Traditionally, disaster relief initiatives have been the domain of western nations. However, with the rise of countries in the Global South, countries like India have developed two complementary lines of effort in disaster management – improvement in the domestic capability as well as an emerging donor that increasingly provides disaster relief to other countries, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region. As one of the world's most disaster-prone countries, India is exposed to several natural hazards, including floods, cyclones, droughts, and earthquakes. It was in the wake of disasters like the 1999 super cyclone in Odisha, the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that India started to improvise on its domestic disaster management. In 2005, the Disaster Management Act was passed, and in 2009 the National Policy of Disaster Management was developed. A National Disaster Reaction Force (NDRF), the world's largest rapid reaction force was also established in 2006. Capacities developed during emergency situations at home were also used to contribute to regional and multilateral efforts on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). India has provided a substantial amount of foreign disaster relief to countries in need. As part of its neighbourhood development efforts, India also contributes to regional disaster preparedness and capacity-building efforts. In line with its diplomatic policy of “neighbourhood first”, many of the recipient countries are in South and Southeast Asia. India's disaster relief efforts are seen as a “smart power” tool to achieve regional leadership. This paper looks at India's role as a first responder in the Indian Ocean region. It also looks at India's regional initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic. The final section looks at the challenges and opportunities in developing India's disaster relief initiatives in the neighbourhood.

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India's Role as the First Responder

India's size, geographical centrality in the region, and border with all but one country in the region enables India to assume an important position in the neighbourhood. This unique position in the region, along with the capability of the armed forces enable it to contribute significantly to the Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief Initiatives. The concept of India being a "first responder" is emerging and reflects the country's willingness and ability to assume the role of a leading power. This has become crucial as Indian strategists worry about the roads being made by Beijing in the neighbourhood region. New Delhi believes that there is a need to solidify its status as a pre-eminent superpower in the region as a "force for good".

The role of India as the first responder is being employed to manage disasters in the region. Domestically, India has been strengthening its disaster management with the Disaster Management Act 2005, the Disaster Management Policy 2009, and National Disaster Response Force for the specialized response to disasters. These are aimed at having a multi-disciplinary approach to disasters – prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, relief, and rehabilitation.¹

With disaster management assuming the seriousness domestically, there has also been a greater debate on humanitarian operations across national borders. There is an increasing focus on regional cooperation, being promoted by the Indian government. It reflects the country's growing capability and increasing willingness to assume the role of a leading power. It is intended to be governed by the principles of "humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence".² Disaster initiative as espoused by the Indian government is of short-term duration and covers a range of activities – from delivery of goods and services, relief and rescue, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. This helps project as India's soft power and is also reflective of India's expanding sphere of influence and capacity to shape events abroad (MEA). Soft power is a concept espoused by social scientist Joseph Nye and talks about a change of behaviour in nation-states by using the power of persuasion or attraction.³ This is coupled with India's deep cultural and spiritual traditions that espouse "extending sympathy" to the disaster affected as a goodwill gesture.

India's HADR in the Neighbourhood and Beyond

Since 2001, India started to enhance capacity building in the neighbourhood and engaged all the stakeholders institutionally. Health diplomacy and providing

humanitarian aid during the time of natural calamities defined India's approach to its neighbourhood. Availability of greater financial resources and a sense of growing international and regional responsibilities became motivating factors. The 2004 Tsunami further became a game-changer for India's disaster management. India not only refused foreign assistance but also assisted neighbouring nations such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives. India deployed fourteen Navy vessels, nearly 1,000 military personnel, and several dozen helicopters and aeroplanes to Sri Lanka.⁴

India was also involved in operations in Bangladesh after cyclone Sidr, and in Myanmar, after cyclone Nargis struck. Notably, Myanmar refused to accept Western aid, it willingly accepted assistance from India.⁵ India also provided critical rice supplies to address the food situation in the disaster-stricken countries. India's response to the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan fostered hopes of improved relations. India extended aid of US\$ 25 million to Pakistan, as apart from cash contributions, both countries agreed to open five transit points on the border to enable the transfer of relief material from India. This supposed improvement in relations, though, was not reflected in 2010, when Pakistan asked India to route its assistance through the WFP. Nonetheless, these initiatives reinforced the notion of India's HADR practice gaining recognition in the neighbourhood, distinct from traditional Western actors. Not only the neighbourhood, but India also responded to humanitarian crises across the world, including Hurricane Katrina in the United States (2005) and the Fukushima disaster in Japan (2011). In 2013, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh while laying the foundation stone for the National Defence University stated, "we have unprecedented access to high technology, capital and partnerships. Therefore we are well-positioned to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond".⁶

In 2014, the Maldives faced a drinking water crisis. The Indian Navy delivered bottled water within half a day of the Maldives' government's pleas for assistance. Under operation Neer, 200 tons of water was lifted by air and seven transport aircraft and two Indian Navy Patrol Vehicle were pressed into service. INS Deepak was put on standby while INS Sukanya carried thirty-five tons of fresh water and two reverse osmosis plants with a capacity to produce twenty ton litres of water per day.⁴ India additionally sent technical experts to aid in the repair and restoration of the desalination and sewage treatment facility. India also provided ship-based desalination plants to alleviate the immediate effects of the crisis.⁷ More importantly, a week later, the Indian government offered the Maldives a second desalination plant to avert future crisis of this nature provided Male requested for it. MEA senior officials

noted that “India, as a matter of principle, does not impose or suggest projects to any country either near abroad or far abroad, unlike some countries that undertake development projects in various parts of the world out of (their) own volition. We purely go by the suggestions and needs of the local government”.⁸

In 2015, India’s massive endeavour was seen in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake. India was the first responder. Under operation “Maitri” there was a massive deployment of the Indian Army, Airforce, and specialized teams. India sent National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) to rescue those trapped under the debris. Several Non-Governmental organizations were also involved in relief assistance. The total support from the Indian government, state governments, and Indian NGOs combined amounted to INR 400 Crore (US\$ 61m). It pledged US\$ 1 billion for Nepal’s reconstruction out of which 40% was a grant.⁹ In September 2016, a Line of Credit (LOC) Agreement for post-earthquake reconstruction projects for US\$ 750 million was signed.¹⁰ India also sent technical teams including structural engineering experts, post-disaster needs assessment specialists, and power experts to help with the restoration of grid lines. In 2017, India provided relief efforts in Myanmar and Bangladesh during cyclone Mora. Relief material as well as food aid was sent to Rohingya refugees as well as locals under operation “Insaniyat”. Not only in the neighbourhood, but New Delhi was also involved in assisting African littoral at times of cyclones, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, and droughts. During the Ebola crisis (2014) and the floods (2017), India provided direct humanitarian assistance and relief to Sierra Leone and to the Horn of Africa countries such as Kenya, Somalia, and Djibouti that were afflicted by severe famines and droughts in September 2011 through the World Food Programme.¹¹ India became the first country to offer help to the southeast African countries - Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, South Africa, and Madagascar which is devastated by Cyclone Idai. In 2020, India’s Navy launched operation Vanilla in Madagascar to provide clothing, emergency food, temporary shelters, and medical assistance to the affected population of Madagascar after the devastation caused by Cyclone Diane.¹²

Not only the central government but also state governments are involved in providing cross-border humanitarian assistance. In 1980, the government of Tamil Nadu created a relief fund to support the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, and also sent aid to Sri Lanka after the end of the civil war, in 2009. In 2019, the Kerala government sent a 15-member medical team to help with relief operations in the aftermath of the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka. UP and Bihar offered assistance to Nepal after the 2015 earthquake. India’s Mizoram state

and the Kachin state of Myanmar have a significant population of Zo ethnicity. After the 2017 cyclone hit Kachin, organisations in Mizoram such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and Mizo Zaimi Insuihkhawm (MZI) contributed to the affected Zo communities across the border.

India's Initiatives during Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic caught the region unaware. Lockdowns, lack of medical infrastructure, and difficulty in ensuring social distancing create massive challenges. According to the GHS 2021 report, countries of all incomes remain dangerously unprepared to meet future epidemic and pandemic threats, South Asia has fared particularly poorly.¹³ The region witnessed a crushing impact on the economy due to the pandemic, especially with regard to the unorganized workforce. There was an increase in unemployment a “serious level of hunger” as per the GHI's severity scale. During this time, health diplomacy became a critical element of India's outreach programme. India drew up a US\$ 1 billion Covid-19 medical assistance plan to targeting 90 countries.¹⁴ India supplied paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine to over 120 countries.¹⁵ In a statement, the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, Mr Anurag Srivastava said, keeping in mind the “humanitarian aspects of the pandemic, it has been decided that India would license paracetamol and HCQ in appropriate quantities to all our neighbouring countries who are dependent on our capabilities”.¹⁶ India has supplied medicines, on a commercial and grant basis, to 133 countries (446 million HCQ tablets and 1.54 billion paracetamol tablets) worldwide.¹⁷ Four days after India began its first vaccination programme domestically, it sent the first consignment of 150,000 doses to Bhutan. This was appreciated by the Bhutanese Prime Minister as a “display of altruism at best”.¹⁸ Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka also received doses as part of grants in aid. India also sent response teams of doctors and specialists to countries such as the Maldives, and also airlifted medicines as well as provided food aid. It also ran several training programmes involving investigators, epidemiologists, clinicians, and representatives from neighbouring countries. The Indian Airforce not only evacuated the Indian nationals stranded due to the Covid-19 outbreak but also citizens of other countries - Bangladesh, China, Madagascar, Maldives, Myanmar, South Africa and the USA to name a few.¹⁹ India's “Operation Sanjeevani” led to the deployment of a large number of wide-bodied aircraft and helicopters all across the country to shift medical supplies and associated equipment. Previously, India has also helped in the evacuation of civilians from conflict-ridden states such as Yemen in 2015, Libya in 2011, and Lebanon in 2006.²⁰

Participation in Regional Relief Initiatives

In the post-Cold war period, there has been a strong rationale for India to participate in regional relief initiatives. Arguably, any initiative at the regional or inter-regional level on disaster management would not materialize without India's participation and assistance due to its economic weight and geographic size. India has been signalling its intent to be a leading actor during emergencies in South Asia.

Over the years, India has contributed to the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Caritas, etc. Notably, the World Food Programme was a net provider of food assistance to India until the early 2000s. In 2006, it acknowledged India as its fifteenth largest donor. In 2022, India signed an agreement with the WFP for the distribution of 50,000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan.²¹ Earlier between 2002 and 2013, India provided wheat and rice worth US\$ 125 million to produce fortified biscuits for the consumption of school children in Afghanistan. India in the last few decades has emerged as one of the leading non-Western donors of international assistance. According to India's budget for 2021-22, its direct overseas aid stood at US\$ 2.4 billion. India also extended a direct line of credit worth 30.66 billion dollars to several foreign countries for developmental projects.²²

Within the region, India has also tried to participate with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), albeit with limited success. SAARC charter identifies the first of the group's objectives as the promotion "of the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life". Effective disaster relief and management fall into this category of activity. However, SAARC since its formation has been gripped with indecision and problems in implementing the programmes. This can also be seen in disaster management initiatives. One of the primary reasons for this is that the political relations in SAARC are not as harmonious impacting all aspects of the association.²³ After the 2004 Tsunami, SAARC came up with the idea of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) in 2006. The office was established in New Delhi. It adopted a disaster management framework from Hyogo Framework for action 2005–2015.²⁴ The SDMC developed various Road Maps on different aspects of disaster management by involving various experts and representatives from member states and such NGOs working in this field as Community Based Disaster Risk Management in South Asia, Application of Science and Technology for Disaster Risk Reduction, and

Management, Coastal and Marine Risk Mitigation Plan, etc. SAARC also approved SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disaster (SARRND) in 2011. The aim was to facilitate a more coordinated, cooperative and planned approach to disasters in the region. The provisions also include setting up a dedicated rapid action force for disaster management. However, SAARC leaders have thus far “failed to gather consensus on the issue, and this remains a point of contention”.²⁵

However, the Nepal earthquake of 2015 proved that while the bilateral assistance came from six South Asian countries, it lacked coordination. There was no SAARC delegation, even though individual countries deployed their civil and military assets in the crisis area. Weeks after the Nepal earthquake, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted, “SAARC Nations can come together and hold annual exercises of rescue teams, doctors, etc on how we can minimize damage during natural disasters.” This signalled the initiation of the South Asian Annual Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx), the first instalment of which was organized by India in November 2015. The official purpose of these exercises is to test and synchronize inter-governmental coordination efforts to institutionalize regional cooperation on disaster response among member countries. One of the joint field exercises involved an earthquake scenario. This allowed participating teams to gauge their capabilities in disaster response while enhancing coordination efforts.²⁶ Although planned as an annual event, there have not been any further exercises since 2015. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Modi tweeted that SAARC nations “needed to chalk out a strong strategy to fight Coronavirus” and proposed outside the “SAARC calendar of routine activities”.²⁷ The idea was seen as the quickest way to act without going into the procedural details. Ministry of External Affairs, in a statement, said, “India’s belief that sharing of resources, expertise, best practices and capacities in these challenging times would go a long way in bringing the countries in the SAARC region closer together”.²⁸ All the countries, except Pakistan, directly made pledges to contribute to the SAARC COVID-19 Fund, which made the pledge of US\$ 3 million and said that its contribution would be parked with the SAARC Secretariat to fight COVID-19. The fund sparked initial interest with all countries agreeing to contribute. However, since its launch, most initiatives under the fund have been carried out by India to send aid to other countries. India also dispatched teams of doctors to Nepal and the Maldives and supplied wheat and other essential food grains and medicines to Afghanistan. Beyond South Asia, India has also expanded its outreach to countries in the Indo-Pacific, Latin America, and Africa. In the Indian Ocean, India was one of the first responders to the

COVID-19 crisis, dispatching the Indian Navy ship INS Kesar to the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Seychelles, and Comoros to deliver essential medical and food supplies in addition to two medical assistance teams.²⁹

India has also assisted in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries. BIMSTEC countries face many cyclones and tsunamis that all require a transboundary approach to crisis management and risk reduction. The need to cooperate in the event of any disaster was felt at the time of the 2004 disaster, but it was short-lived. Even as policies were put in place, mechanisms required for success were lacking. In 2015, India started to focus on “Environment and Disaster Management” in the region. This was due to India’s emerging foreign policy which emphasised strengthening connectivity with neighbouring states through collaborations in HADR.³⁰ India’s maritime cooperation doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) provided additional impetus for BIMSTEC’s HADR-related collaborations. The first BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise (DMEx) was conducted in October 2017 in India and comprised a Table Top Exercise (TTX), Field Training Exercises (FTXs) on earthquake and flood, and an After Action Review (AAR). All seven member states participated in the four-day exercise. The second and most recent BIMSTEC DMEx was conducted in February, 2020. Representatives from five BIMSTEC countries participated in the event, with Bhutan and Thailand being the exceptions. The participating countries took part in simulations and used local resources to address flooded localities. BIMSTEC also established a Centre for Weather and Climate in 2018 and ran a workshop on building disaster-warning systems.³¹ As part of its Indian Ocean strategy SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), India provided international HADR to satisfy its “sense of obligation ... to demonstrate empathy for the victims of disasters in all parts of the world” and “to promote future bilateral dialogue between the affected and the donor nation.” This assistance functioned as a diplomatic tool that deepened bilateral relations with neighbours including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. During the Covid-19 pandemic, food, covid medications, ayurvedic medicines, and medical assistance teams, were provided to Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros under SAGAR.³²

India is also the founding member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) which includes disaster risk management within its mandate. IORA attempts to strengthen institutions and capacities within the association and promote cooperation and coordination among experts, stakeholders, and officials across the region. It was in 2021 that the first IORA Expert Group

Meeting on disaster risk management took place to “provide a concrete roadmap for member states to establish an IORA-Working Group on Disaster Risk Management (WGDRM)”. Similar to that is the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium launched by India with a critical theme of regional cooperation in HADR. The sub-themes involve maritime domain awareness, anti-piracy, and disaster management. India has also offered itself as the lead coordinator for HA/DR cooperation in the IONS working on capacity building and collaboration. HA/DR also remains the focus area of the Milan exercises organized in the Bay of Bengal. There has been a focus on developing regional consensus on the methodologies for HA/DR engagement in the region and standard operating procedures for such operations. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad comprising India, US, Australia, and Japan has also been venturing into the area of disaster risk reduction. It has been leveraging its ties to address the challenge of sustainable development, quality infrastructure investment, and HADR in the wider Indo-Pacific. During Covid-19, India shipped around 66.3 million doses, out of which 10.7 million were sent as grants to developing- and low-income countries and 19.8 million doses were dispatched as part of the UN-led COVAX initiative to bridge the vaccine divide. India also proposed Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure during the 2016 Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. It is a step to reduce risks to vulnerable public infrastructure, including health care, transport, clean drinking water, sanitation, telecommunications and electricity, roads, and ports. CDRI supports countries to upgrade their systems to ensure disaster and climate resilience of existing and future infrastructure, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Sendai Framework.³³ However, for the South Asian region, the challenge remains about designing, constructing, and maintaining the infrastructure, and developing the financial incentives, standards, governance arrangements, and capacities required to facilitate the resilience of infrastructure to extreme events and changes in future hazard patterns, while fulfilling the commitment to leave no one behind.³⁴

Challenges to India being the First Responder

1. Information/Communication Malaise

To deal with disasters on a regional basis, there needs to be effective sharing of information, along with robust data, scientific information, and appropriate skill sets and capacities to understand risks and act upon them on a timely basis. The information must not only be shared between government agencies,

but it also must reach communities — early warnings of impending threats are only effective if people hear and act on them.

2. Early Warning Technology

South Asia is highly exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of flood events. Every year floods inundate large parts of India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. To cope with these trans-border floods, there is a need for regional cooperation and collaboration among the border countries to strengthen the country's flood early warning systems and operate them beyond the borders also. There is a need to draw on a strong information technology sector. Increased availability of satellite data and access to the digital world has enormous scope to provide real-time information to save lives and jobs in the event of a disaster. Technology-enabled early warning systems have evolved to help manage disaster risks effectively.

3. Absence of a Standard Operating Procedure

In India, multiple agencies remain involved in disaster response, but the decision-making continues to remain ad hoc. Several ministries are involved in the organisation and dispatching of the relief material. Different assets of the Indian Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, or other agencies are deployed in the crisis area. India currently has been working on drafting a standard operating procedure (SOP) to deal with calamities and has shown interest to share with countries in the region.

4. Emerging Crisis

A new range of threats poses a challenge to crisis response mechanisms in the region. Greater economic linkages have increased inter-dependence, but also made pandemics such as Covid-19 more pervasive and costly. Increasing levels of energy consumption have not only heightened climate change risks but also amplified short-term human-induced threats such as oil spills. The need for new energy sources has in turn led to a rise in the risk of industrial catastrophes such as nuclear reactor failures. The rising dependence on technology has made cyber-attacks more threatening. These challenges make it important to rethink and broaden the scope of humanitarian crises and responses to tackle these.

5. Inactive Regional Organisations

Despite having an official policy in the form of SARRND, no SAARC-level contingent has ever been deployed during emergencies in the region. Similarly, in BIMSTEC, although member countries have shown a willingness to work together on relevant issues, there is a large gap to fill in terms of establishing

operating procedures for joint relief campaigns. With climate uncertainty, humanitarian emergencies in the region are poised to grow. It is pertinent that India invests in regional frameworks for disaster management and take the lead in setting up a road map for greater cooperation within the region. Building capacities through training and joint exercises and coordinating comparative advantages for collective action will help India leverage goodwill among its neighbours through its disaster relief programmes.

Conclusion

India's disaster relief assistance has increased leaps and bounds over the last two decades. This has taken place due to India's rise as an economic power, its increased neighbourhood engagements, as well as its vision and desire, to be the first responder to disasters in the region. Disaster response is usually considered non-controversial and it has the potential to improve ties with the neighbouring countries. Moreover, it fuses in cooperation at not only the nation-state level but also involves other stakeholders—businesses, local governing structures and communities. India's response to the Covid-19 pandemic reflects New Delhi's intent to respond and adapt to new kinds of crises. The region's vulnerability to traditional and non-traditional emergencies should be a cue for India's participation in the regional issues before players like China fill the first responder void. It, therefore, becomes important that India has a standard operating procedure ready to respond to disasters within the first seventy-two hour timeframe. It is crucial that India thinks ahead and prepares itself domestically as well as regionally for a range of new, complex and more frequent emergencies. Special preparations and capabilities need to be developed. Simulation exercises need to be conducted, possible emergency scenarios need to be thought out so that deployments and assistance in the need of the hours can be extended in time, whether through bilateral or regional channels. India's HADR initiatives reflect the ambition to become the first provider within the region. Till now, India has had considerable success, it can work to improve internal processes, and improve coordination within different branches of the government, as well as with state governments, civil society and media will ensure streamlining of operations. India also needs to amalgamate a bilateral approach with other regional mechanisms. HADR is a largely non-controversial point of agenda but can act as a tool for strengthening India's ties with its neighbours, along with reviving regional cooperation, whether through SAARC, BIMSTEC, or other forums. BIMSTEC for example has been conducting PANEX-21 HADR exercises. Exercises like

these allow us to explore new challenges and modify the existing relief and rescue operations. More importantly, these endeavours indicate the expanding role of the armed forces, which is the Operations Other than War (OOTW). There is a growing need for regional cooperation in Disaster Management due to large-scale disasters striking across national borders. Therefore, it is important to create feasibility for the “One Region-One Response” policy. This will not only promote regional cooperation through information sharing, experiences, and best practices but also catalyze a rebound for the regional economy.

Disaster Response operations also allow for gaining expertise in surveillance and reconnaissance, evacuation, restoration of communications, debris clearance and quick construction, medical and surgical assistance in field conditions, setting up of relief infrastructure, and green field supply chain establishment.³⁵ These can be used in situations of conflict as well. Military Diplomacy and extending soft power are good outreach tools but HADR readiness is also a pointer to operational readiness. Preparation for HADR involves research, innovation, interoperability, and joint training. In the aftermath of a disaster, there are larger social concerns regarding crime, conflict, socio-economic vulnerability, and migration. Alleviating citizen suffering and the presence of a force for citizen safety is considered a force of greater good not only for an individual country but the entire region.

Notes:

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