

India's Disaster Diplomacy Strengthening Regional Cooperation in South Asia

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Abstract

India's disaster diplomacy has become a pivotal component of its regional strategy in the South Asian region through disaster relief, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations and humanitarian aid which helps in strengthening regional cooperation. India has positioned itself as a first responder to neighbouring nations by and providing assistance during crisis as the region is recognized for being highly prone to natural disaster such as earthquakes, cyclones, and floods. The paper discusses India's disaster diplomacy as a tool for regional engagement, analyse its institutional mechanisms, flagship disaster response exercises, and assistance to multilateral organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC. The paper would examine and highlight India's swift and rapid disaster response which has reaffirmed diplomatic ties. Various of the initiatives and decisions have been taken by India on several such tragic events including the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004), the 2015 Nepal earthquake (Operation Maitri), and Cyclone Amphan (2020) among others. India's COVID 19 vaccine diplomacy showcased its capability to deliver important and quick health aid independent of immediate disaster relief. Yet, the challenges remain persistent in this regard too as China's competing humanitarian initiative and logistical limitations hamper and also constraints the effectiveness of India's disaster Diplomacy. Disaster risk is expected to intensify due to the climate change. The paper maintains that institutional mechanisms, more developed and enhanced early warning systems and fostering multilateral cooperation can further secure India's leadership in regional disaster management.

Keywords: India, disaster diplomacy, South Asia, humanitarian assistance, regional cooperation, HADR, SAARC, BIMSTEC.

INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters are not unfamiliar to South Asians rather the people of this region have grown seeing these disasters since decades. South Asia witnesses all sorts of weather-related calamities. The continent is regularly struck by flooded deltas, dry plains, urban sprawl floods, ferocious droughts, cyclone-stricken crops and eroding beaches. The area is also a melting pot of wars, poverty, accidents and other man-made and natural dangers that put the lives, houses and livelihoods of many of its two billion citizens in jeopardy routinely. There were 128 natural disaster occurrences in South Asia between 2006 and 2008, just a span of two years. 93 percent of them were hydro-meteorological in origin and 86 flooding incidents were registered, with approximately 8000 fatalities. India experienced the greatest number of disaster occurrences. South Asia, which is already extremely prone to natural disasters, is set to be disproportionately affected as the climate warms up. Climate change is now introducing significant extra risks to this already unstable disaster environment. Global warming, its temperatures on land, sea and

atmosphere, is poised to intensify prevailing trends of floods, droughts and cyclones. Previously seen dangers to the developmental trajectories of each nation in the region as it is expected to rise while it is also believed that instances may come where we have to tackle new aspects of disasters with the coming time. Climate and weather-related hazards already impact fields, crops, livestock, property, assets, food access, availability, transport and communication. It diminishes economic potential and deepens poverty. It is poor women and men who suffer most from natural disasters and are at the forefront of climate change. South Asia is inhabited by billions of populations, out of which over 70 percent poor. Even though it has an enormous natural resource base including water, minerals, forest, productive fertile land and hard-working people, this region is underdeveloped for the main reasons of political instability, poor leadership, failure to use natural resources at the optimum level and frequent occurrence of disasters. The largest population of poor individuals in the entire world, totalling over two thirds, can be found living in Asia and virtually half resides in Southern Asia. In the developing world, the second highest level of vulnerability is found within South Asia for cyclones. Member nations of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

(SAARC) are particularly susceptible to hydro-meteorological as well as geological hazards of the type of flood, landslide, drought, cyclone, earthquake, tsunami, etc. Additionally, the World Disaster Report (WDR) indicates that this region has the world's highest affect to killed ratio. The effects of disasters are compounded by the region's fast-expanding cities, but improvement is being seen as nations communities continue to invest in pre-disaster planning. Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), in turn, is offering technical support to upgrade hydrometer systems, prepare urban disaster risk management plans, plan and execute resilient reconstruction, assist recovery planning, and implement adaptive social protection measures. "India's HADR operations, including rapid response missions during regional crises, reflect its commitment to being a first responder in South Asia, leveraging its defence forces and institutional frameworks for swift humanitarian action" (MEA, 2021).

Conceptual Framework of Disaster Diplomacy

Disasters happen within particular political circumstances and in the middle of other political processes and activities that are already ongoing and thus they never exist in a vacuum. The notion that disasters could have political impacts is not new. It is only the examination of the impacts of disasters on conflict as a relatively new pursuit. Disasters ignore geopolitical boundaries. Based on location, size, and magnitude, disasters may interact with these pre-existing circumstances in potentially existing situations and in potentially transformative ways. The notion that disasters could have political impacts is not new. It is only the examination of the impacts of disasters on conflict as a relatively new pursuit. Disasters are increasing and as a result of the failure to respond to causal factors contributing to vulnerability to disasters, including improper design and construction of structures, inadequate land-use planning and environmental protection, poverty, and marginalization, the frequency of disasters and related losses has been incrementally rising during the last thirty years. Typically, the nations hasten to sympathize with the nations hit by disasters of any sort they may be. The nations also donate money and many forms of human aids. This also coincides with the development of various terms connecting various modes of diplomacy and relations of the states with one another, regardless of whether the states have conflicts, competition, alliances or integration. Disaster diplomacy is a fairly new term, which doesn't possess an agreed holistic definition, as much as it is an academic discipline studying the mechanism of managing the effect of disasters

on state relations. It is also defined as "diplomacy that seeks to understand how and why disaster-related activities influence conflict and cooperation." Disaster diplomacy is thus interested in all types of parties conflict at any time. Politics and disasters are inextricably interconnected. Politics mould the underlying conditions and processes generating and sustaining the vulnerabilities that are the root causes of disasters. "Disaster diplomacy plays a critical role in fostering regional cooperation, particularly in geopolitically sensitive areas like South Asia, where shared vulnerabilities necessitate collaborative responses" (Kelman, 2012). Vulnerability has been defined as the social processes positioning individuals into danger without options, resources, or means to reverse the adversity. Measure to mitigate vulnerability and prevent disasters is squarely in the domain of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and this has involved confronting the cause of disasters by enhancing social conditions. Such measures are usually assumed to be technocratic in nature which can evade politics. But as being related to processes like resource allocation, social welfare, and governance, normally ideology-ridden, DRR and vulnerability reduction are political in nature. One of the methods exploring disaster-politics interfaces is 'disaster diplomacy'. Disaster diplomacy aims to explain how and why disaster activities, whether pre-disaster (DRR), post-disaster (rebuilding and related activities), or at the time of disasters, influence or do not influence diplomatic efforts. Disaster activities encompass health-related disasters like disease outbreaks and other acute public health incidents. Limited research has investigated how health interventions can affect diplomatic efforts, particularly for acute public health incidents.

Disaster relief may prove to be a strong instrument for cross-border collaboration. With the emergence of nations in the Global South, nations such as India have evolved two parallel lines of action in disaster management— enhancement of the domestic capability as well as a new donor that increasingly offers disaster relief to other nations, especially in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India has extended a significant amount of foreign disaster relief to needy countries. As part of its neighbourhood development, India also assists regional disaster preparedness and capacity-building initiatives. India's disaster relief efforts are presented as a "smart power" instrument to establish regional leadership. India's size, geographical location at the centre of the region, and border with all but one nation in the region allow it to take on a significant role in the neighbourhood. This unique role in the region, along with the capability of the forces allow it to make a critical contribution to the Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief Initiatives. The idea of India as a "first responder" is new and captures the nation's desire and capacity to take on the role of a prime mover. This has become essential as Indian strategists are concerned about the paths being paved by Beijing in the neighbourhood area. New Delhi feels the necessity to strengthen itself as an Asian pre-eminent superpower as a "force for good." India's position as a first responder is being utilized in order to respond to disasters within the region. Domestically, India has been enhancing its management of disasters by the Disaster Management Act 2005, Disaster Management Policy 2009, and National Disaster Response Force for the specialized response to disasters. These are in place to having a multi-disciplinary approach towards disasters – prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, relief, and rehabilitation. Through disaster diplomacy and by Providing humanitarian aid, India has strengthened its soft power. It is seen as a quick responder and as a nation that is first in line to provide help and assistance when its neighbours are in need. Among other tools of soft power, this one proves to be more effective as it is seen as a life saver and stands during the test of time.

Case Studies of India's Disaster Diplomacy

2004, Indian Ocean Tsunami: A powerful undersea earthquake caused a tsunami that destroyed coastal areas of India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia in 2004. In response, India initiated Operation Sea Waves, delivering instant relief to hit areas specially within India. It Sent the Indian Navy to Sri Lanka and Maldives for relief work. It also supplied food, medical teams, and rehabilitation assistance, assisted in restoring communication networks in hit areas. "India's response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, providing immediate aid to Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia, marked a shift in its foreign policy towards proactive regional disaster leadership" (Mohanty, 2005). 2005 Pakistan Earthquake – Diplomatic Humanitarian Aid: An earthquake of 7.6 magnitude occurred in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, resulting in the death of more than 86,000 individuals. India's Response: In spite of political hostilities, India provided relief aid, dispatched medical supplies, tents, and blankets to the affected areas. Also permitted humanitarian aid to transit across the Line of Control (LoC) for the first time.

Maldivian Water Crisis of 2014 – Emergency Aid to Maldives: There was a huge water crisis when the Maldives' sole desalination plant was destroyed by a fire, leaving 100,000 Male residents without drinking water. India's Responded by Launching Operation Neer, dispatched 1,200 tonnes of fresh drinking water, Sent Indian Navy ships with desalination units and coordinated a quick response in less than 24 hours of the request. Polio Eradication Support to South Asian Countries: Polio continued to be endemic in some of South Asia, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan. India had crucial Role as after becoming polio-free in 2014, India provided technical support to Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. It deployed medical teams and vaccine stockpiles and also collaborated with WHO and SAARC for regional immunization programs. Ebola Outbreak (2014-2016) – Medical Aid to Affected Countries: Ebola outbreak had touched various regions and global health issues arose. India responded by Contributing \$10 million towards the WHO's Ebola relief program. Supplied protective medical equipment to SAARC nations to improve health preparedness. It also Established rapid response teams to deal with future pandemics. Nepal Earthquake of 2015: A 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit Nepal, claiming more than 9,000 lives and extensive damage. India Responded by Initiating Operation Maitri, the biggest disaster relief operation by India ever. It sent specialized rescue units (NDRF) and medical teams and deployed the Indian Air Force (IAF) to airlift relief material and rescue marooned individuals. It also Contributed \$1 billion for reconstruction and long-term support. "Operation Maitri was one of India's largest overseas disaster relief operations, with immediate deployment of military and medical teams, showcasing its leadership in regional humanitarian assistance" (Ghosh, 2016). 2016 Sri Lanka Floods & Landslides – Relief Efforts: Sri Lanka was hit by disastrous floods and landslides, claiming more than 100 lives and displacing thousands. India Operated two Indian Navy ships with medical supplies, provisions, and relief material, sent in rescue teams to help conduct relief operations, provided post-disaster assistance and humanitarian aid.

Medical Assistance to Dengue and Malaria Outbreaks: South Asia is often hit by dengue and malaria outbreaks to which India's Response was: Firstly, in Bangladesh (2019 Dengue Outbreak) India provided mosquito nets, drugs, and diagnostic kits and secondly in Sri Lanka (2017 Dengue Epidemic), India provided medical personnel and vector control assistance. Cyclone Amphan (2020) – Assistance to Bangladesh: One of the most powerful cyclones in the Bay of Bengal, impacting India and Bangladesh, displacing millions. India's responded by coordinating with Bangladesh authorities to issue early warnings. Even provided financial aid and relief materials. India deployed rescue and medical teams to the affected regions and enhanced disaster preparedness mechanisms for future cyclones. "Through the Vaccine Maitri

initiative, India supplied over 66 million vaccine doses to nearly 100 countries, reinforcing its role as a global health partner despite domestic challenges during the second COVID-19 wave" (MEA, 2021; Chatterjee, 2022). India's Contribution to SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund: Regional coordination was needed to respond to COVID-19 effectively. India Contributed \$10 million to the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund. It organized virtual SAARC meetings on pandemic response and provided testing kits and ventilators to smaller countries like Bhutan and Maldives. These cases highlight India's proactive disaster diplomacy, reinforcing regional cooperation through swift humanitarian assistance, financial aid, and reconstruction efforts.

India's Role in Regional Disaster Cooperation Mechanisms

Given India's proactive role in Disaster diplomacy, it has been strengthening its tools for the same through disaster cooperation mechanism, disaster management and humanitarian relief in South Asia. India is a player of pivotal role in regional disaster cooperation mechanism both bilaterally and by engaging on regional, and multilateral forums like BIMSTEC, SAARC, G20 and others with its significant contribution. Given the dynamics of the region in regard to natural disasters, India has also been an active participant in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery operations. India's connection with an array of stakeholders such as national governments, non-governmental organizations, regional and international partners, donors, civil society and the private sector is highly established. This is actively pursued by facilitating partnership among governments and institutions by collaborative training, learning from experiences and sharing best practices, capacity building and improving technical capacity.

Being a member of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, India has been collaborating with its member nations on platform of SAARC through SAARC Disaster Management Centre. The headquarter of SAARC Disaster Management Centre is in Gujarat, India. The SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) is a regional centre for disaster risk reduction. Here, India provides technical support, early warning systems, and research assistance. Main initiatives of India under this are launched such as South Asia Disaster Knowledge Network for best practice sharing, development of SAARC Regional Framework on Disaster Management (2016-2030) and assistance to neighbouring countries in capacity-building programs. However, there are issues like limited cooperation due to geopolitical tensions (e.g., India-Pakistan relations) and insufficient funding and political commitment from all SAARC nations. "Despite India's efforts to institutionalize disaster response mechanisms within SAARC and BIMSTEC, political constraints, particularly with Pakistan, have limited the effectiveness of these regional frameworks" (Gupta & Basu, 2020). India has been actively participating with Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in disaster management, where it hosted the first BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise (2017) in New Delhi and established a Tsunami Early Warning Centre to support BIMSTEC countries. It faces few issues in realising its true potentials because BIMSTEC is less institutionalized than SAARC and requires more joint funding and quick response coordination. India has also been actively involved with International Disaster Response Programs such as UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), where India aligns its policies with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030), ASEAN-India Cooperation on Disaster Response, where India cooperates with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to build disaster resilience and G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group (2023), where India chaired discussions on international disaster management strategies.

Challenges in India's Disaster Diplomacy

The disaster-prone South Asia is facing intense and more frequent disasters of various kinds. India could feel limited in assisting these countries as its response capacities would overstretch and would limit its effectiveness. India is seen to be having limited impact as India's assistance to Nepal has also not delivered lasting benefits as the bilateral relationship has become increasingly strained over territorial disputes since 2021. Geopolitical tensions have affected India's diplomatic efforts in disaster response because it could be hindered by existing geopolitical tensions with neighbouring countries. Thus, impacting collaboration and coordination during crises. There have been potential rejection due to historical hostilities as Pakistan rejected India's aid during 2022 floods. "Geopolitical tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan, have stalled effective disaster response coordination under SAARC, limiting the potential of regional cooperation in humanitarian assistance" (Rahman, 2018). Geopolitical tensions and erosion of mutual confidence between the states has been a significant challenge to India's Disaster Diplomacy in South Asia. As visible the India-Pakistan Rivalry is, in the same context Pakistan has often seen to be reluctant in accepting Indian aid and responses to such situations, as seen after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and 2010 floods. The loss of confidence and political mistrust under SAARC is also seen to be impacting joint disaster relief efforts which hampers the efforts made by India. Although China is not part of South Asia yet, it plays the major role in obstructing India's Diplomacy in the region and has created a major strategic competition to India's Disaster Diplomacy in South Asia by providing assistance to the South Asian Countries. India hopes for these countries to rely on it but they are rather seen to be balancing between the two i.e., India and China. India wishes to extend its presence in the region and hope for them to see the trap that China is getting them into. Yet, there is China's growing influence in the region.

Institutional and Coordination Challenges weakens the cooperation between the member nations of the organisation such as weak SAARC mechanism and limited scope of BIMSTEC. It is often seen that there is lack of operational efficiency due to political divisions in SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) and also there is absence of rapid-response force for regional disasters. This ultimately makes SAARC less efficient to deal with such circumstance as it is expected to act when needed so. BIMSTEC often lacks structured funding and a dedicated response force despite having a disaster management framework. Logistical and resource constraints also impact India's ability to respond and fulfil its expectations of providing support and aid. Infrastructure gaps affect India's ability to deploy aid quickly which gets limited by transport and logistics issues as seen in Cyclone Amphan (2020) where disrupted supply chains slowed India's response in Bangladesh. Although India is a large economy still it faces financial constraints while providing disaster assistance. Long term disaster assistance also gets limited and India seems unable to provide the same due to budgetary limitations. Political sensitivities have an impactful role in Disaster Assistance as it speaks a lot about perceptions of states about each other. Few South Asian countries consider the efforts made and assistance or aid provided by India i.e., India's Disaster Diplomacy as a tool for influencing those countries politically and diplomatically. Sometimes they perceive India to be building hegemony in the South Asian Region and accuse it of Big Brother Syndrome. Thus, constraining India in providing assistance and questions India's motives.

Domestic political factors play significant role for India being able to provide such necessary arrangements because if such situations arise, India would prioritize its domestic crisis and internal disaster response over regional aid. Same could be seen during COVID-19 second wave (2021), where India was struggling with the pandemic and taking necessary measures in its own country which delayed India's international medical assistance. Government and military are primarily and majorly relied on for disaster relief efforts.

There is a huge lack of private sector involvement which reduces efficiency in supply chains, technology integration and logistics. Thus, there is need for better Public-Private Partnerships in Disaster response.

Policy Recommendations and Way Forward

India needs to expand its disaster response capabilities by developing its logistics and infrastructure for rapid response. For this, India requires to strengthen its capabilities through HADR so that it could respond to disasters more speedily and more efficiently. Under this it could make investments in platforms such as utility helicopters, landing platforms, hospital ships, disaster-ready airbases and naval hubs. Incorporation of technology for relief duties could be increased by NDRF for much quicker response times. Expanding the scope of NDRF for international assistance also needs to be focussed. India could also take up lead for building regional disaster logistics hubs and establish a regional coordination centre for efficient coordination and response. A better budgetary allocation would enhance capability of India to provide assistance and humanitarian aid in the time of need. It would also improve emergency preparedness and logistic capabilities.

In response to geopolitical and strategic challenges which are politically sensitive, India should counter by promoting neutral and inclusive disaster diplomacy. It should focus on building trust and confidence with the regional states by engaging in non-political humanitarian assistance by offering disaster relief on humanitarian needs as regional security strategy and not doing so with the intension of forming political alliances. Even if India is not doing so, it should consider the feeling of insecurity and dilemma that these countries possess and should take measures keeping that in mind. It should focus on perception building and gaining confidence. Also, by increasing cultural connect and people to people exchanges in such areas would help in this regard. To have alternative channels of cooperation, India should look for bolstering Track II diplomacy (academic, NGO, and private sector engagement). Regional coordination could also be engaged by conducting joint military HADR exercises between the countries of regional forums such as BIMSTEC and SAARC.

Projection of achievement is one of the major steps in disaster diplomacy that India should take up such step and improve its projection of humanitarian achievements amidst its ambition to become global power. India should utilize emerging forums and all the opportunities for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts as it could lead to capacity building and enhanced cooperation. Through this India could build its image as a growing power capable of administering operations beyond its borders. There should be encouragement to corporate and technological environment to develop a public private partnership model which could fund and implement necessary programs in response. Government should also encourage involvement of Indian tech-companies in building disaster monitoring systems.

The region lacks proper mechanism and channel for such issues and to tackle the problems arising out of climate change and lack of disaster preparedness. India could lead and focus on implementing Regional Climate Resilience Initiatives. Under this there could be establishment of South Asia Climate Resilience and Disaster Early Warning System and joint researches could be conducted on climate adaptation and disaster mitigation. Long term challenges could be potentially addressed by developing a regional task force on climate-induced disasters. Measures could be taken to enhance regional preparedness to disasters by leveraging satellite-based disaster response tool such as ISRO's early warning system. "India's advancements in space technology, particularly through ISRO's disaster monitoring satellites, have significantly enhanced early warning systems and regional disaster preparedness across South Asia" (ISRO, 2022). SAARC and BIMSTEC have been of little use and effect in addressing Disaster challenges

and therefore SAARC and BIMSTEC mechanism needs to be reformed. "Strengthening BIMSTEC's disaster response framework and integrating AI-driven early warning systems could enhance India's ability to lead regional disaster resilience efforts" (Mishra, 2021; Shrestha, 2023). BIMSTEC's framework of Disaster Risk Reduction could be subject to expansion by creating a regional emergency fund and setting up a joint command centre for coordinated relief operations. On the other hand, SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) is much needed to be revitalized. It could be achieved firstly by Increasing joint training exercises among member states and secondly by Setting up a joint command centre for coordinated relief operations.

Conclusion

India has a long tradition of humanitarian aid, going back to its early post-independence period. At ones India in 1959, gave relief to Tibetan refugees escaping China, and in the other instance in 1970s, it helped Bangladesh recover from successive cyclones and famine. India also provided relief and reconstruction during Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war. India is gearing up to face this challenge, strengthening its position as a prime humanitarian aid and security provider. Traditionally, natural disasters have tended to disrupt economies and destabilize societies, providing fertile ground for suspicion and competition but not India's. Appreciating the fact that empathy transcends political differences, New Delhi has always used its resources to come to the aid of neighbouring nations in times of distress. These moves not only help end immediate suffering but also set the stage for long-term diplomatic outreach. With natural disasters becoming more common, India's disaster diplomacy will continue to be an important tool of its foreign policy. India's recent regional diplomacy reflects a strategic combination of soothing persuasion and respect for its neighbour's internal dynamics. Understanding the threat presented by China's heavy regional investments, India will need to ratchet up its efforts to provide distinctive value to its neighbours. Disaster diplomacy is not a just a reaction measure; it's an active ingredient of India's foreign policy. When India's helping hand goes out in response to a calamity, one thing is distinctly conveyed: political rivalries will not get the better of humanitarian solidarity. Here, India's response is a reminder that real geopolitical influence does not just rest with the power to project military force or economic might but also in the power to evoke hope and solidarity in a moment of crisis. India's disaster diplomacy will become a progressively significant component of the nation's foreign policy arsenal. The rising frequency of climate change related disasters will put an additional burden on India's unique strengths. As the global community is trying to come to terms with the twin threats of climate change and political turbulence, India's disaster diplomacy provides an interesting template of how countries can use humanitarian assistance to create long-term allies and ensure regional security. "India's disaster diplomacy aligns with its Vishwa Guru vision, positioning the country as a responsible regional leader committed to humanitarian cooperation and sustainable development" (Joshi, 2023).

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