

Does Disaster Diplomacy Improve Inter-State Relations?

Written by Ilan Kelman

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ILAN KELMAN, NOV 4 2014

Does Disaster Diplomacy Work?

Disasters place human suffering on display—of friends and enemies alike. As part of the common human spirit, we often hope that, no matter who is troubled by calamity, we would be moved to help and that help would be graciously accepted. That process turns out to be tricky in international politics, when countries experience cataclysms and multilateral relations determine who provides and who accepts humanitarian aid. Research into 'disaster diplomacy' investigates this topic.

Disaster diplomacy investigates how and why disaster-related activities do and do not influence conflict and cooperation (Kelman, 2012). The key phrase is 'disaster-related activities' covering (i) pre-disaster efforts including prevention, preparedness, planning, and damage mitigation, and (ii) post-disaster actions including response, reconstruction, and recovery. Disaster diplomacy case studies are not just about what happens when a volcano erupts in a war zone (Klimesova, 2011) or when enemies consider sending and accepting humanitarian aid (Akcinaroglu et al., 2011). They also examine the situation before a disaster manifests, such as how a flood warning system could potentially bring together communities (Ahmad and Ahmed, 2003) or how vaccination campaigns might generate lasting ceasefires (Hotez, 2010).

Based on the empirical evidence of case studies, the overall conclusion from disaster diplomacy is that disaster-related activities do not create new initiatives in achieving peace or reducing conflict, but a diplomatic process with pre-existing conditions can be catalysed or supported (Kelman, 2012). If that catalysis occurs, then the disaster-related activities influence diplomacy in the short-term, but not in the long-term.

In the short-term, over weeks and months, all forms of disaster-related activities have the potential to affect diplomacy, such as by spurring it on or by providing a space in which peace efforts can be pursued. For that to occur, a pre-existing basis must exist for the reconciliation. This could be ongoing negotiations, formal or informal cultural connections, or trade links. Even over the short-term, disaster diplomacy is not necessarily successful, since disaster-related activities can sometimes foment conflict and reduce diplomatic opportunities—or have no impact at all on peace and conflict. Irrespective of what happens over the short-term, over longer time periods, non-disaster factors have a more significant impact on diplomacy than disaster-related activities. Examples of non-disaster factors are leadership changes, mutual distrust, belief that an historical grievance should supersede current humanitarian considerations, or a desire for conflict due to the advantages gained from it.

These conclusions have been corroborated through case studies covering inter-state conflict, intra-state conflict, disaster risk reduction, disaster response, bilateral relations, and multilateral relations. The analysis and conclusions have been extended to sub-national case studies, including para-diplomacy (international relations conducted by non-sovereign jurisdictions) and non-state-level relations and conflicts. Thus far, the evidence shows that disaster diplomacy has the potential (not inevitability) for improving inter-state, and other, relations only in the short-term and only if a non-disaster-related pre-existing basis is available.

Case Study 1: The 26 December 2004 Earthquake and Tsunami

On 26 December 2004, a large-magnitude, shallow earthquake shook Aceh, Indonesia, causing tsunamis which raced across the Indian Ocean, inundating communities in more than a dozen countries around Asia and Africa. The two countries with the highest death tolls, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, were each embroiled in long-standing,

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internal political conflicts which had been particularly violent over the previous three decades. Aceh, Indonesia, and eastern Sri Lanka were particularly badly hit by the tsunami and were also centres for the violence.

Consequently, clear disaster diplomacy opportunities emerged. Both areas sorely needed major efforts at post-conflict and post-tsunami reconstruction, neither of which could be completed by the local or national authorities alone. With a large international presence, with the world watching as survivors were assisted, and with the need for extensive efforts to clean up and rebuild from the waves and the wounds, would this disaster bring the warring parties together and reconstruct a society alongside the infrastructure?

Amidst the international humanitarian response, the Indonesian government and militants in Aceh negotiated for and eventually signed a peace deal on 15 August 2005. Despite violence flaring on occasion and, still ten years after, many aspects of the post-tsunami and post-conflict reconstruction being unresolved or incomplete, the peace is lasting in Aceh. Surely this is a classic case of disaster diplomacy succeeding?

The answer is 'no' because negotiations had started between the two parties on 24 December 2004, just 48 hours before the earthquake and tsunami (Gaillard et al., 2008). There is no doubt that the catastrophe provided a diplomatic space in which peace could succeed if the parties involved sought that. We will never know if the ongoing negotiations would have succeeded in the absence of a disaster, as many previous efforts had failed. But when the shaking and waves struck Aceh, the conflicting parties were already in the process of reducing conflict and aiming for long-term peace. Consequently, the disaster could be used as an excuse to achieve their long-term goal of an agreement if they wanted it—and that happened (see also Enia, 2008; Klimesova, 2011; Le Billon and Waizenegger, 2007).

Simultaneously in Sri Lanka, distribution of the humanitarian aid, access to areas in the north and east of the country which were not under government control, and perceptions that people affected in the south were not being treated fairly led to a spiralling of the violent and non-violent conflict. Deals were reached and then broken or overturned. In November 2005, Sri Lanka elected a hard-line president who campaigned on pursuing military means for ending the conflict. That was achieved in 2009, when Sri Lanka's military could finally declare that they had ended the armed struggle against Colombo. An uneasy peace continues in Sri Lanka.

Why did disaster diplomacy never take off in Sri Lanka? The major parties involved had other reasons for not seeking peace, with examples being the personal power given by continuing the conflict, concern that dealing with the violent parties in the north and east would legitimise them, and mistrust of the other side (see also Beardsley and McQuinn, 2009; Hyndman, 2011; Wickremesinghe, 2006). These aspects dominated efforts at conflict resolution through disaster response and further hindered distribution of post-tsunami aid.

Case Study 2: Low-lying Islands under Climate Change

Contemporary climate change is causing major impacts for communities of low-lying island atolls such as in Papua New Guinea, the Maldives, and Tuvalu. While no certainty exists of island disappearance or islander evacuation (Kelman, 2014; Webb and Kench, 2010), some communities, such as on the Carteret Islands of Papua New Guinea, have been forced to move due to climate change (Connell, 1997). This situation has led to a discourse of so-called 'climate refugees' who are said to be waiting in huge hordes to invade other countries, leading to massive 'climate conflict'—a discourse which is politically constructed and so far unsupported by empirical evidence (Hartmann, 2010; Kelman, 2014).

Nonetheless, the possibility remains that numerous island communities might need to leave due to climate change impacts, ranging from lack of freshwater and diminishing food supplies to coral reef deaths and sea-level rise. In planning for potential movement, negotiating with other countries is necessary regarding who pays for moving, where to resettle, and how to govern the migrants. Given the global political ramifications of answering these questions and the depth to which identities, cultures, and countries are being affected, it would seem to have strong potential for bringing countries together to seek a common good from the global challenge of climate change to which all of humanity has contributed.

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Yet climate change diplomacy has not yet succeeded. The climate change negotiations under United Nations auspices—the annual United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties—is wracked by major disagreements and political conflict. So far, a lasting, legally binding agreement on stemming climate change causes and dealing with its consequences has not emerged, despite twenty years of meetings. Island governments and islanders, frustrated by the lack of progress and worried about the increasingly visible impacts of climate change on their communities and countries, are instead pursuing initiatives of their own, rather than waiting for the world to come together over climate change.

One such initiative is Many Strong Voices, which is about developing and implementing collaborative and strategic actions on climate change for the Arctic and small island developing states (SIDS). Recognising the need to act for themselves irrespective of the global political conflict over dealing with climate change, the Arctic and SIDS peoples are pursuing climate change adaptation (one subset of disaster risk reduction) for themselves on their own terms, especially seeking their own choices and pathways for potential migration (Kelman, 2010; McNamara and Gibson, 2009). That is difficult, given their small populations and often limited resources, meaning that they are using their 'Many Strong Voices' to seek external support—which so far remains limited.

This case study illustrates the disaster diplomacy pattern. Despite a long lead-time and a global political mechanism for addressing climate change, agreement has thus far not been reached, forcing those affected to address disaster risk reduction on their own. Even with a pre-existing basis in the form a negotiating forum, trying to prevent disaster emerging from the hazard driver of climate change has not yet catalysed climate change diplomacy.

The Disaster Diplomacy Process

The disaster diplomacy analyses demonstrate that, fundamentally, disaster-related activities are not a high political priority. Perceived historic wrongs and domestic politics can outweigh accepting assistance, as shown by Cuba's refusal to accept American aid during the 1998 drought and the USA's refusal to accept Cuba's, Venezuela's, and Iran's offers of aid following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Gaining and retaining political power can supersede peace, demonstrated by Ethiopia's and Eritrea's intransigence to link drought relief to conflict resolution from 1998-2000.

Such examples emerge from national governments, mainly decisions made by Heads of State, Heads of Government, and their administrations. There might yet be hope for disaster diplomacy when considering diplomacy tracks beyond government-to-government relations. Glantz (2000) details the long history of Cuban and American weather and climate scientists collaborating while Fidel Castro led Cuba. These collaborations fed into disaster risk reduction and occurred most likely because the governments were not aware of them. Ker-Lindsay (2007) explains how the media and vociferous grassroots expectations fuelled Greece-Turkey earthquake diplomacy after lethal tremors struck each country three weeks apart in 1999. He then examines how the push from below nearly derailed the careful, measured approaches towards rapprochement which the elites in each country had been enacting before the disasters.

The complex web of interactions involving all disaster and diplomacy activities means that any linear analysis of correlations and connections is likely to be flawed. A given starting point for analysing disaster diplomacy does not necessarily give a specific, predictable outcome for a case study. Given the importance of pre-existing conditions in determining whether or not disaster diplomacy becomes even a short-term catalyst, it is hard to determine where the starting point for analysis should be.

Consequently, disaster diplomacy is best viewed as a long-running process with multiple parties interacting, rather than as a snapshot phenomenon which either works or does not work. Disaster-related activities are indeed one influence amongst many on all forms of diplomacy, but trade, resource management, sports, culture, personalities, domestic politics, and non-domestic politics are also major influences.

The diplomacy tracks to emphasise are choices, deliberate or inadvertent, by all parties, including politicians, civil

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servants, the media, business leaders, movie and sports stars, and grassroots movements (amongst others). Similarly, the disaster-related activities to pursue are choices. Combining disaster-related and diplomatic-related activities therefore becomes a complex combination of choices and actions by a complex combination of parties. If someone or a group decides that disaster diplomacy is desirable, then actively lobbying for, supporting, and implementing it are pathways to follow. If someone or a group decides that disaster diplomacy is not desirable, then actively lobbying against it and undermining efforts for it are pathways to follow.

Attempting to influence disaster diplomacy pathways could backfire. A leader, upon being informed about how to implement disaster diplomacy, could decide that linking disaster-related activities and conflict resolution is not wanted and, consequently, might stop disaster risk reduction programmes or avoid humanitarian relief. Open attempts at reconciliation which are rebuffed by the other side would prove to be a political nightmare. Openly blocking disaster diplomacy could polarise others who then become determined to make it succeed.

An overarching challenge is that disaster diplomacy might be attractive because it appears to be a quick fix for solving conflict. It is naïve to expect that decades or centuries of differences could be overcome overnight, simply because a tornado destroyed a town or a multinational building code was promulgated. In contrast, it is a truism that successfully dealing with both disaster and diplomacy are long-term processes, requiring thoughtful, careful steps, whilst ensuring that all key parties continue to be on board to support the long-term goals and to serve mutual interests—at least, in theory. In practice, too much of diplomacy and disaster-related activities is done reactively with limited planning—which could mean that a disaster diplomacy case study might eventually succeed through luck.

Because, in the end, the scientific truism holds that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. No successful examples of new diplomacy based only on disaster-related activities have yet been identified, but many historical archives have not been explored while future disaster risk reduction or disasters could overturn the current conclusions. Nonetheless, for the moment, the evidence available shows not only that disaster diplomacy is not an effective way for improving inter-state relations, but also that disaster diplomacy should not be relied on to be effective for improving any relations over the long term.

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