

# Disaster Diplomacy: Current Controversies and Future Prospects

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Globalization, population migration, climate change, and the explosion of low-intensity conflicts throughout the world have created an increasingly complex environment for humanitarian aid and international relations.<sup>1-3</sup> Concurrently, the global community has witnessed unprecedented levels of philanthropy and humanitarian assistance in response to large-scale disasters.<sup>4,5</sup> Disasters due to natural hazards in Aceh, Pakistan, and Yogyakarta have highlighted the role of humanitarian assistance in serving devastated populations, while conflicts in Darfur and Gaza have attracted significant concern for the world's most vulnerable populations caught in political disarray. These intersecting trends have exhibited the potential role of humanitarian assistance in improving international relations and have served as the backdrop for the emergence of the controversial role of disaster diplomacy.

Advocates of disaster diplomacy highlight its role in facilitating cooperation and dialogue. Opponents, however, assert that disaster diplomacy violates the humanitarian principle of neutrality by politicizing disaster response. Complicating this debate are a number of ambiguities regarding the specifications of this maturing field. In particular, disaster diplomacy lacks a formal definition of principles, metrics of success, a strategy for integration into formal diplomatic efforts, and a dedicated training program for humanitarian agents planning to engage in this form of diplomacy. This begins to address these lingering issues, offering suggestions for the development of this interesting concept.

Disaster diplomacy is an evolving concept that broadly considers both the strategies for effective humanitarian action as well as the political consequences of those actions. However, the concept of disaster diplomacy has been cited inconsistently, illustrating an ambiguity that remains with regards to its operational definition. To most practitioners, disaster diplomacy is "concerned with the extent to which disaster-related activities—prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery—induce cooperation between enemy parties, nationally or internationally."<sup>6</sup> More traditional diplomats counter by asserting that disaster diplomacy requires intervention that leads to cooperation between factional or warring parties through formalized diplomatic relations.<sup>7,8</sup> In this context, disaster diplomacy is framed within the conventional definition of diplomacy, which refers to the management of international relations through official interaction between governmental representatives.<sup>9</sup> In truth, the dynamic nature of disaster diplomacy likely encompasses both perspectives. Nonetheless, these inconsistencies create important challenges and must be reconciled in order to craft an operational paradigm that allows for consistent application and further evolution of disaster diplomacy.

Humanitarian medical operations have been particularly useful in demonstrating the general framework of disaster diplomacy, while also introducing the unresolved questions that must be addressed as the concept matures. The US response to the tsunami that struck the Aceh Province of Indonesia in 2004 is a quintessential example that illustrates the existing ambiguities regarding the operational definition of disaster diplomacy. Following the humanitarian response in Aceh, some experts cited disaster diplomacy when local perceptions of the US improved as a result of the response.<sup>10</sup> In support,

a poll by the Heritage Foundation found that “in the first substantial shift of public opinion in the Muslim world since the beginning of the US global war on terrorism, more people in Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, now favor American efforts against terrorism than oppose them.”<sup>11</sup> Traditionalists posit more stringent requirements, arguing that disaster diplomacy involves more than “winning hearts and minds”. According to this perspective, disaster diplomacy was not operational in Aceh until formal diplomatic efforts facilitated by the global community contributed to the August 2005 Memorandum of Understanding, the culmination of peace talks between the Indonesian government and separatist groups.

Such ambiguity may reflect obfuscation between disaster diplomacy and the related fields of health diplomacy and public diplomacy. Of the accounts of Aceh, those focusing on changing local perspective framed their discussions specifically under the banner of health diplomacy rather than disaster diplomacy. This distinction is not specified under current formulations of health and disaster diplomacy, therefore, both emerging paradigms will have to be developed and distinguished to resolve such ambiguities.<sup>12</sup> Also unclear is whether disaster diplomacy refers to inter-governmental diplomatic relations that result from disaster-related activities or to the process of improving those relations through public sector initiatives. The latter of the two overlaps with the function of public diplomacy, demanding clarification between disaster diplomacy and public diplomacy. Clarifying such issues will develop the conceptual framework of disaster diplomacy, as it is distinct from related forms of diplomacy and will yield a unified set of guiding principles for the emerging field.

The challenge in defining and developing disaster diplomacy extends beyond semantic concerns, since the guiding principles codified in a consensus definition will dictate the metrics of success used in program evaluation. Developing a standardized assessment model based on these metrics will be critical as disaster diplomacy matures. The Sphere Minimum Standards, widely accepted in the humanitarian arena, should logically serve as the foundation for a specialized assessment model in disaster diplomacy.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, a supplemental component will have to be designed to capture diplomatic outcomes in accordance with the consensus definition that is crafted for disaster diplomacy. Analogous performance models in inter-governmental diplomacy and public diplomacy can serve as resources in this process. Developing such a model for program evaluation in disaster diplomacy will be critical in order to ensure the quality and accountability of these unconventional diplomatic missions.

Another issue that must be addressed is how to better incorporate these non-traditional diplomatic missions into formal diplomatic efforts. This question is critical, since forming stronger connections between disaster operations and formal diplomatic activity could enhance the impact of disaster diplomacy. The appointment of the first Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in the US Department of State in 1999 and the creation of the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy in

2007 signal a growing national interest in linking public affairs with traditional diplomacy in the US.<sup>14</sup> Such platforms could provide the basis for building programmatic linkages between disaster diplomacy and traditional diplomacy. However, potential dangers of such an approach first must be discussed before proceeding in this manner. For instance, association with governmental or security-minded diplomacy may be disadvantageous for humanitarian agencies that derive benefit from non-governmental status. In such cases, the apolitical status of an agency may be called into question, threatening the success of operations in countries that mistrust agencies based on suspected government affiliation. The recent targeting of humanitarian personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan illustrates the plausibility of such a threat. Another reason to proceed with caution is the potential threat of such an approach to the fundamental humanitarian principle of independence according to the Code of Conduct governing disaster response; linking humanitarian response to government activity may compromise this vital principle. These potential threats will have to be critically examined before initiating linkages between disaster response and formal diplomacy.

Finally, as disaster diplomacy emerges as a *bona fide* field, practitioners will have to develop novel and aggressive programs to train disaster responders in the art of diplomacy and the practicality of personnel safety. Limited “cross-training” opportunities exist within current professional programs, leaving practitioners unprepared for the unique tasks required during disaster diplomacy missions. The need for diplomatic training already has been recognized in the field of health diplomacy, with the initiation of the Summer Programme on Global Health Diplomacy at the Graduate Institute of International Studies and the formation of the Academy of Global Health Diplomats.<sup>15</sup> Prior experiences in humanitarian diplomacy have highlighted the need for security training of personnel operating in conflict zones, and so training programs are being developed for that purpose. Professionals engaged in disaster diplomacy would benefit from these existing programs, but designing a tailored program for disaster diplomacy will prove beneficial. Components of such training could be incorporated into existing residency, fellowship, and mid-career professional programs.

Disasters are not democratic. They disproportionately affect the poor, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized. Accordingly, disasters are inherently political. As a result, innovative political and diplomatic strategies will be necessary to reach the vulnerable populations devastated by disasters. The emerging field of disaster diplomacy may offer an unconventional solution, affording disaster diplomats an avenue to gain access to the world’s most vulnerable populations.

Multidisciplinary cooperation that bridges disaster response, public diplomacy, and international relations will be required to develop the concept toward this end. As disaster diplomacy is developed further by addressing the concerns discussed herein, humanitarian agents will be better equipped to effectively navigate complex political terrains and will emerge as effective agents in improving the overlying political currents that ultimately dictate the health of victims in a disaster.

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