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INDIA'S HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF

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Key Takeaways

India's humanitarian assistance and disaster relief has largely been directed towards its neighbourhood, including after the 2004 tsunami and the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

India's relief operations in the region are mainly bilateral; regional efforts such as the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters have not been successful.

The Covid-19 pandemic reflects the changing nature of transnational emergencies, which India must prepare for to consolidate its role as a first responder in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Introduction

The 2015 Nepal earthquake, one of the deadliest in its history, evoked an outpouring of support from the international community in the form of cash contributions, in-kind relief, and search and rescue operations. Among the quickest to respond was India, who launched Operation *Maitri* by deploying the Indian Army, the Air Force, and other specialised teams.[2] Claiming it to be its largest ever disaster relief operation, India's response garnered praise from many quarters with a top UN official acknowledging the country's role as a "first responder".[3] The relief operation also coincided with the Modi government's focus on regional cooperation, including assertive claims to take on the role of a "first responder" to regional crises.[4]

Nepal's then Ambassador to India recognised India's timely efforts and called the response "unique" in its scale.[5] However, as the relief measures went on, there were also accusations of the Indian contingent hindering other international aid efforts, lack of coordination between Indian and Nepali agencies, and insensitive reporting by Indian media.[6] As a result, India's largely successful operation raised some questions on its organisational and technical preparedness towards disaster relief and management in the region. Moreover, the

massive international response to the crisis featured bilateral assistance from six different South Asian countries but with no coordinated relief effort, including from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). India's leading role thus paradoxically also exposed the absence of effective regional mechanisms for disaster relief in South Asia.[7]

The case of Nepal reflects four trends in India's approach to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). First, the centrality of its immediate neighbourhood. Geographically, India's HADR historical footprint can be largely traced to the subcontinent and, in a more limited way, to the Indian Ocean region. According to one estimate, more than two-thirds of India's humanitarian assistance has been directed to South Asia.[8] India has carried out similar relief operations to assist its neighbours in the recent past, including after the 2004 tsunami, the 2005 India-Pakistan earthquake, cyclones *Nargis* and *Mora* in 2008 and 2017 respectively, the 2014 water crisis in the Maldives, and the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2018.

Second, South Asia is particularly vulnerable to natural calamities.[9] Since 1970, the number of disasters in the region has increased five-fold with estimated direct losses amounting to US$80

2   S Jaishankar, Media Briefing on Indian Rescue and Relief Efforts in Nepal, (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, April 26, 2015), https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/25132/media+briefing+on+indian+rescue+and+relief+efforts+in+nepal+april+26+2015.

3   "Nepal Earthquake: UN lauds India's relief operations in the country," *The Economic Times*, May 27, 2015, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nepal-earthquake-un-lauds-indias-relief-operations-in-the-country/articleshow/47439670.cms.

4   "IISS Fullerton Lecture by S. Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary in Singapore," (speech, Singapore, July 20, 2015), https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25493/iiss+fullerton+lecture+by+dr+s+jaishankar+foreign+secretary+in+singapore; Statement by External Affairs Minister on Calling Attention Motion on "Situation in Nepal and State of Indo-Nepal Relation'' in Rajya Sabha, (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, December 03, 2015).

5   Mayank Bhardwaj and Ratnajyoti Dutta, "China? India? We're grateful for their help: Nepal's ambassador to India," Reuters, April 28, 2015, http://blogs.reuters.com/india/2015/04/28/china-india-were-grateful-for-their-help-nepals-ambassador-to-india/

6   Soutik Biswas, "Why is Indian media facing a backlash in Nepal?," Reuters, May 4, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-32579561; "India, Nepal spar over IAF aid sorties as Kathmandu airport clogs up," Hindustan Times, April 29, 2015, , https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/india-nepal-spar-over-iaf-aid-sorties-as-kathmandu-airport-clogs-up/story-iI5C818CQNq9h9JT3P0GZL.html; Shreya Upadhyaya, "India's Response to Disasters and Humanitarian Assistance in South Asia," Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, Vol. 13, Oct 2018, p. 321, http://www.associationdiplomats.org/Publications/ifaj/Vol%2013/13.4/IFAJ-13.4-ARTICLE%201-F.pdf.

7   "The Crisis Response to the Nepal Earthquake: Lessons Learned," European Institute of Asian Studies, May, 2016, p. 27, https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/The-Crisis-Response-to-the-Nepal-Earthquake-_-Lessons-Learned-colour-1.pdf.

8   András Horváth "India as a Humanitarian Donor in the 21st Century: The Seeds of a More Ambitious Role," (Berlin; GPPI, April 3-5, 2013), p. 6, https://www.gppi.net/media/Horvath_2013_BASAS_india.pdf.

9   "The Disaster Riskscape across South and South-West Asia: Key Takeaways for Stakeholders", UNESCAP 2019 p. 5, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/IDD-APDR-Subreport-SSWA.pdf.

billion.[10] The region is also the most exposed in the world to flooding, the second most exposed to cyclones, and it experiences most of its disaster fatalities due to earthquakes.[11]

Third, under the label of "first responder," India has been signalling its intent to be a leading actor during emergencies in its neighbourhood. Commenting rather positively on the experience so far, in 2019, the Minister for Home Affairs Amit Shah emphasised that, "in the Indian sub-continent, we have been playing the role of the first responder in the case of disaster… India is leading the initiatives in disaster management and disaster resistance."[12] Such ambitious assessments and declarations, along with India's improved economic and military capabilities have led to greater expectations from neighbours in times of crises.

Finally, beyond the case of Nepal's earthquake, a range of new types of emergencies is also plaguing the region. Such non-traditional crises include pandemics, chemical and biological accidents, industrial failures and terrorist attacks. Together, they have pushed the boundaries – both geographically and technically – of the traditional conception of humanitarian crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the changing nature and growing complexity of such emergencies. In an era of increased uncertainty, India will have to adapt its approach to traditional disaster response.

To realise its leadership ambition, respond to new expectations, and address an increasingly complex and frequent range of emergencies in the neighbourhood, India will have to adapt on two fronts. Internally, India needs to focus on better coordination between the multiple government agencies handling overseas relief operations, state governments providing cross-border assistance, the media, and civil society. Externally, India must improve bilateral and multilateral collaborations with its neighbours and leverage regional institutions for disaster management.

Methodology and Definitions

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), humanitarian assistance is "designed to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies."[13] The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) posits that "humanitarian action includes the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods."[14] Humanitarian assistance is usually categorised as short-term relief in the aftermath of disasters, compared to long-term assistance classified as development aid.

While the Indian government does not use a standard definition for HADR, it has provided aid in emergencies arising largely out of natural calamities and conflicts. The Development Partnership Administration (DPA) division of

10   "Disaster Risk Management in South Asia," (Washington DC: The World Bank: GFDRR, 2012), p. 3, http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/648281468170977802/pdf/763020WP0P11400Box0379791B00PUBLIC0.pdf.

11   "Disaster Risk Management in South Asia," p. 3, 6, op-cit.

12   "India first responder in case of disaster in sub-continent, leading initiatives in disaster management: Amit Shah," *Business Standard*, November 8, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/india-first-responder-in-case-of-disaster-in-sub-continent-leading-initiatives-in-disaster-management-amit-shah-119110800620_1.html.

13   "Towards Better Humanitarian Donorship 12 Lessons from DAC Peer Reviews," (Paris: OECD, 2012), p. 7, https://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/12lessons.pdf.

14   "Criteria for inclusion of reported humanitarian contributions into the Financial Tracking Service database, and for donor / appealing agency reporting to FTS," (New York: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, September 2004), https://fts.unocha.org/sites/default/files/criteria_for_inclusion_2017.pdf.

the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) primarily manages India's external HADR. It coordinates foreign efforts domestically with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and other organisations within the central government and across regional states and civil society. Since 2011-12, the annual union budget has included a separate line item on "Aid for Disaster Relief" under its "Grants and Loans to Foreign Governments" sub-heading.[15]

This policy brief uses data on India's HADR operations from the MEA annual reports, MoD annual reports, Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs reports, Union Budgets, and various news reports. It also sources figures from the UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service

(FTS) database, which tracks yearly assistance provided as per donors. All conversions to US Dollars (US$) have been made as per the annual average exchange rates sourced from the Reserve Bank of India.[16] While HADR as a term is primarily used for relief operations involving the military, this brief uses it to denote all assistance provided in times of humanitarian emergencies. As part of the Sambandh Initiative on regional connectivity, this brief maps India's HADR operations to eight of its neighbouring countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, which are collectively referred to as South Asia, though the extended neighbourhood of the Indian Ocean is also analysed.

Different Norms in the Neighbourhood?

Historically, the West has been the leading provider of humanitarian assistance, with its economic and military capabilities being called upon frequently by disaster-prone nations lacking the resources for immediate relief. Lately, the economic rise of countries in the Global South, particularly India, has reduced this dependence on Western humanitarian assistance, especially in South Asia.[17]

India's insistence on emphasising territorial sovereignty in its humanitarian assistance narrative results in mostly bilateral dealings with foreign governments

Although India does not have a designated HADR policy, it has provided humanitarian assistance and been involved in relief measures

in and outside of its neighbourhood. India has also utilised its humanitarian assistance as a diplomatic tool to deepen bilateral relations and assert its claim to regional and global leadership.[18] According to some analysts, a key difference in India's approach has been its emphasis on respecting the sovereignty of the affected state.[19] Indian officials also tend to emphasise that it assists countries in the neighbourhood based "on their priorities" and only on "requests made to the Government of India".[20]

However, beyond political narratives, there have been instances of India violating the sovereignty of a conflict-affected neighbour while providing relief. For example, India defended its support for refugees and military intervention in the 1971 East Pakistan civil war on humanitarian grounds, but Pakistan termed it an infringement of its

15   See "Loans and Grants to Foreign Governments" section under Expenditure Budget for years 2011-12 onwards, https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/previous_union_budget.php.

16   Annual average exchange rate is available with the Reserve Bank of India, https://www.rbi.org.in/scripts/PublicationsView.aspx?id=17923.

17   Claudia Meier and C.S.R. Murthy, "India's Growing Involvement in Humanitarian Assistance," (Berlin; GPPI, March, 2011), p. 4, https://www.gppi.net/media/meier-murthy_2011_india-growing-involvement-humanitarian-assistance_gppi.pdf.

18   Claudia Meier and C.S.R. Murthy, p. 32, op-cit.

19   India has endorsed UNGA resolution 46/182; Claudia Meier and C.S.R. Murthy, p. 8, op-cit.

20   Question No.535 Humanitarian Service in Neighbouring Countries, Ministry of External Affairs, February 6, 2020, https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/32369/question+no535+humanitarian+service+in+neighbouring+countries.

sovereignty.[21] In 1987, as the Sri Lankan civil war escalated, India deployed its Coast Guard and Air Force to drop several tonnes of humanitarian relief to the beleaguered Tamil minority population, which the Sri Lankan government termed "a naked violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity."[22]

Beyond these exceptions, however, India's outlook is broadly in line with global standards such as the ones laid down by the UNOCHA, which advocate providing humanitarian assistance in accordance with the principles of "humanity, neutrality, and impartiality."[23] Similarly, the Oslo Guidelines of 1994 on the "Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets In Disaster Relief" mention "respect

to sovereignty" as a guiding principle for deploying military assets during emergencies.[24] Regionally, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND) also mentions the importance of consultation, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity of the parties involved in humanitarian activities.[25]

Especially in its own neighbourhood, India's insistence on emphasising territorial sovereignty in its humanitarian assistance narrative results in mostly bilateral dealings with foreign governments and only rare engagements with regional international organisations.

Domestic Coordination Challenges

Although there are multiple agencies involved in any humanitarian operation, India's decision-making is largely ad-hoc and there is no standard operating procedure that dictates a specific chain of command. All decisions are taken in consultation with these agencies and the operating procedure varies with each case.[26]

The picture is further complicated because India categorises humanitarian assistance under the larger umbrella of development cooperation. In January 2012, the Indian government set up the DPA with an aim to streamline India's bilateral development programs in friendly countries.

HADR is specifically under the purview of the DPA-II division in the MEA. Prior to 2012, the budget for HADR was handled by the Technical and Economic Cooperation division, which the DPA replaced.

On receiving a request for assistance from a disaster affected government, the DPA-II division coordinates efforts within the MEA, MoD, and other ministries to organise and despatch relief material. The Integrated Defence Staff Headquarters (IDS HQ) is assigned with handling domestic and foreign requests for assistance within the MoD. Based on an assessment of the

21   Srinath Raghavan, 1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674728646.

22   "Indian Planes Drop Aid to Besieged Sri Lanka Tamils," Los Angeles Times, June 5, 1987, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-06-05-mn-3083-story.html.

23   UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief, para. 20, (November, 2007), https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OSLO%20Guidelines%20Rev%201.1%20-%20Nov%2007_0.pdf.

24   UNOCHA, Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief para 21, p. 12, op-cit.

25   South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters, (November 11, 2011), p. 2, http://saarc-sdmc.org/sites/default/files/SARRND.pdf.

26   Arjun Katoch, "A Review of Indian Participation in International Disaster Response," (Delhi Policy Group (DPG) Policy Note, November 14, 2017) Volume: II issue 8, p. 2, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/dpg-policy-note-vol-ii-issue-8-a-review-of-indian-participation-in-international-disaster-response-1070.pdf.

scale and magnitude of the emergency, assets of the Indian Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, or other agencies are deployed in the crisis area, as per sources.

In 2005, India set up the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) as the designated agency for disaster management at home. This was followed by the National Policy on Disaster Management (NPDM) in 2009, which put into place important guidelines for carrying out relief measures domestically.[27] While providing international relief does not explicitly feature in its mandate, the NDMA frequently engages with foreign entities on capacity building measures and deployment of resources abroad. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), a specialised task force established under the NDMA has also provided on-ground crisis relief as part of India's HADR operations abroad.[28]

Growing Contribution: Bilateral HADR

India's growing presence in the domain of humanitarian assistance coincides with its rise as an economic power over the last few decades and its inclination to assume a position of regional and global leadership.[29] Since 2014, Prime Minister Modi has also frequently evoked the neighbourhood and emphasised regional connectivity as a focus area.[30]

Table 1 provides details of India's bilateral assistance to countries in the region over the last twenty years, with a description of the military and non-military assets deployed, relief material or service provided, and the monetary value of the assistance wherever available.

27   National Policy on Disaster Management 2009, National Disaster Management Authority, October 22, 2009, https://ndma.gov.in/images/guidelines/national-dm-policy2009.pdf.

28   "National Disaster Management Authority Annual Report 2015-16," (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016), p. 31, https://ndma.gov.in/images/annreport/ENG-2015-16-AR.pdf.

29   "IISS Fullerton Lecture by S. Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary in Singapore," op-cit.

30   "Prime Minister's speech at the 18th SAARC Summit," (speech: Kathmandu, November 26, 2014), https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24321/Prime+Ministers+speech+at+the+18th+SAARC+Summit.

Table 1: Bilateral HADR to the neighbourhood (2000-19)

Year	Affected country	Disaster type	Relief provided	Assets deployed
2003	Sri Lanka	Floods	5,000 food packets, 2,500 blankets, 16 truckloads of medical supplies	1 Naval ship - INS Sharda, 2 IL 76 aircraft, 1 An-32 aircraft, 283 personnel (medical officers / assistants, divers, communication specialists), 9 inflatable boats
2004-05	Maldives	Tsunami	Medical camps on ships, drinking water, rescue and relief, transportation of relief material, repairing and restoring generators and communication. Relief package of INR 5 Crore (US$1.1 m)	6 Navy ships, 1 Naval tanker, 4 aircraft, 4 helicopters
	Sri Lanka	Tsunami	66 tonnes of ration, 4.5 KL of kerosene oil, 7 tonnes of medicine, 30,000 pairs of socks.	2 Naval ships, 2 IL-76 aircraft, 7 helicopters, 1 Field ambulance, 9 doctors, 130 paramedics
2005	Pakistan	Earthquake	1,300 tonnes of relief material Assistance of US$25m + in-kind contributions worth US$15.5m	1 aircraft, 2 trains
2007-08	Bangladesh	Mudslide	Cash assistance of US$10m	
		Floods and Cyclone	Essential food items - rice, wheat, milk powder; medicines, tents, blankets, ready-to-eat meals, and portable water-purifiers. In-kind assistance worth US$1.5m	1 Naval ship - INS Gharial, 2 LSTs
			Adoption of 10 severely affected coastal villages at a cost of US$2.5m	
2008	Afghanistan	Conflict	Donation of ten ambulances, supply of 30,000 benches to schools	
	Bangladesh	Floods	1,000 tonnes of skimmed milk powder and 40,000 tonnes of rice	
	Myanmar	Cyclone	125.5 tonnes of relief material - medicines, clothing, utensils, water tanks, tents, tarpaulins worth INR 5.4 Crore (US$1.24m)	2 Naval ships - INS Rana and INS Kirpan, 6 IL-76 aircraft, 2 AN-32 aircraft, 2 Medical teams, 47 personnel
	Nepal	Floods	Assistance of INR 20 Crore (US$4.6m)	
	Pakistan	Floods	6,000 blankets, 10,000 mosquito nets Relief assistance of INR 1.3 Crore (US$0.3 m)	
2009	Afghanistan	Conflict	Emergency evacuation and relief to bomb blast victims	1 IL-76 aircraft
	Bhutan	Floods	Relief assistance of INR 10 Crore (US$2m)	
	Sri Lanka	Conflict	2 medical consignments, 70,000 agricultural starters packs and 2,600 tons of shelter material In-kind assistance worth INR 9.2 Crore (US$1.9m)	62-member field hospital, 7 demining teams

Year	Country	Disaster	Relief material	Military/other assets
2011	Myanmar	Earthquake	Cash contribution of US$1,000,000	
2012	Myanmar	Conflict	Assistance of US$1,000,000	
2014	Maldives	Desalination plant fire	Bottled drinking water	2 Naval ships - INS Sukanya, INS Deepak, 1 aircraft
	Sri Lanka	Landslides	Relief goods worth INR 25 Lakhs (US$40,000)	
2015	Myanmar	Cyclone	104 tonnes of relief material including food and medicine supplies	1 C-17 and 1 C-130J aircraft
	Nepal	Earthquake	10,000 blankets, 1,000 tents and 1,000 tarpaulin sheets, food, medical supplies, water, and other relief material	13 military aircraft including C-17, IL-76, and C-130, 18 medical teams, 5 Army Engineer Task Forces (ETF), 5 Advanced Light Helicopters, a total 1636 Indian Air Force sorties, amounting to a total flying effort of 863 hours, 546 Army aviation sorties, 10 NDRF technical teams, 16 USAR teams of NDRF comprising more than 700 rescuers and 18 dogs
2016	Sri Lanka	Floods	50 tonnes of relief material	1 C-17 aircraft, 2 Naval ships - INS Sutlej and INS Sunayna
2017	Bangladesh	Conflict and refugee crisis	884 tons of relief material including rice, pulses, sugar, salt, cooking oil, tea, ready to eat noodles, biscuits, mosquito nets etc.	2 C-17 aircraft, 1 Naval ship - INS Ghariyal
		Cyclone	Search and rescue of 33 Bangladeshi fishermen stranded at sea	1 Naval ship - INS Sumitra
	Myanmar	Conflict and refugee crisis	42 tonnes of relief material including medicines and food items	1 C-17 aircraft
		Cyclone		1 Naval ship - INS Sumitra
	Sri Lanka	Drought	8 lorry mounted water bowsers and 100 tons of rice	
		Floods	Food supplies, water, inflatable boats, diving team and medical teams for flood relief efforts through Indian Navy Ships	
2018	Afghanistan	Drought	1.7 lakh tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of Chana Dal	
2019	Sri Lanka	Terrorist attack		15-member medical team sent by Kerala state

Source: Ministry of External Affairs annual reports, the Ministry of Defence annual reports, UNOCHA FTS database, and scholarly publications. Please contact author for a detailed list of sources for each case.

In terms of its economic impact and fatalities, the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was one of the gravest natural catastrophes South Asia has ever witnessed.[31] India's tsunami relief operations were crucial in emphasising HADR within its policy discourse, paving the way for more operations abroad in the coming years.

India's total actual expenditure on disaster relief grants between 2009-2019 was INR 495 Crore

In spite of being one of the most severely affected countries, India refused foreign assistance in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami even while assisting its neighbours Sri Lanka and the Maldives. [32] However, it later accepted help from the UN and private agencies.[33] According to one observer, this was motivated by a desire to demonstrate India's global leadership ambitions and changing the narrative of India being a recipient of aid to one of being a donor.[34]

India's post-tsunami relief efforts were followed by operations in Bangladesh after cyclone *Sidr* and in Myanmar post cyclone *Nargis*. While Myanmar refused to accept Western aid, it willingly accepted assistance from India.[35] This further reinforced the notion of India's HADR practice gaining recognition in the neighbourhood, distinct from traditional Western actors.

The following decade saw India's biggest foreign HADR endeavour with Operation *Maitri*, in Nepal. It involved the engagement of multiple government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the deployment of a large civil-military contingent. The total support from the Indian government, state governments, and Indian NGOs combined amounted to INR 400 Crore (US$61m).[36] The central government spent around INR 117 Crore (US$18m) on disaster relief for the year.[37] Apart from the deployment of military assets for search and rescue operations and distribution of relief material, India sent technical teams including structural engineering experts, post disaster needs assessment specialists, and power experts to help with the restoration of grid lines.[38]

In 2017, Myanmar and Bangladesh witnessed multiple humanitarian crises, including cyclone *Mora* and the worsening of the ethnic conflict in the Rakhine state. India launched Operation *Insaniyat* to assist Bangladesh and Myanmar with relief efforts towards the Rohingya refugees. India's total relief provided to Myanmar between 2017-2019 to address the refugee crisis amounted to US$6.41 million.[39]

While there have been visible improvements in India's HADR capabilities in recent years, some analysts point to a plateauing of contributions as humanitarian assistance compared to the significant rise in India's development assistance.[40] India's total actual

31 "South Asia Disaster Report 2016," (Colombo: Duryog Nivaran Secretariat, 2017), p. 20, https://www.gndr.org/images/newsite/News_items/SADR_2016_Final.pdf.

32 Gareth Price, "Diversity in donorship: the changing landscape of official humanitarian aid: India's official aid programme," p. 15, op-cit.

33 "Pride and Politics: India Rejects Quake Aid", *The New York Times*, October 19, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/19/world/asia/pride-and-politics-india-rejects-quake-aid.html.

34 Gareth Price, p. 17, op-cit.

35 C. Raja Mohan, "Indian Military Diplomacy: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief," Institute of South Asian Studies, 2014, p. 8, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/178456/ISAS_Working_Paper__184_-_Indian_Military_Diplomacy__Humanitarian_Assistance_26032014162545.pdf.

36 "Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report 2015-16," (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2016), p. 14, http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/26525_26525_External_Affairs_English_AR_2015-16_Final_compressed.pdf.

37 See - Actual Expenditure, 2015-16 for "Disaster Relief" under "Grants and Loans to Foreign Governments", Statement 20, Union Budget 2017-18, https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2017-2018/ub2017-18/eb/stat20.pdf.

38 "National Disaster Management Authority Annual Report 2015-16," (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016), p. 31, op-cit.

39 Question No.1456 MoUs on Loans To Foreign Countries, Ministry of External Affairs, July , 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/ru1456_anxx2.pdf.

40 András Horváth p. 9, op-cit.

expenditure on disaster relief grants between 2009-2019 as reported by MEA was INR 495 Crore.[41] This translates to less than 1% of the total expenditure on grants and loans to foreign governments in that period.[42] While the deployment of military assets during an emergency can be contingent on the affected country's willingness, the quantum of cash contributions is more or less the decision of the Indian government.

Beyond Delhi: Regional States and Civil Society Mobilisation

An interesting domestic aspect of India's external relief operations has been the role of state governments in providing cross-border humanitarian assistance. State governments are becoming increasingly involved in disaster relief to neighbouring countries because of proximity, cultural and political reasons. But this is not new: in the 1980s, for example, the government of Tamil Nadu created a relief fund to support the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

There have been multiple recent instances of Indian states lending aid to neighbouring countries in times of emergencies. In 2019, the Indian state of Kerala sent a 15-member medical team to help with relief operations in the aftermath of the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka.[43] The states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which share a border with Nepal, offered assistance after the 2015 earthquake.[44] Similarly, Tamil Nadu sent aid to Sri Lanka after the end of the civil war, in 2009.[45]

Such activism of regional states is often a reflection of civil society mobilisation to support relief across borders. In a country as vast as India with cultural relations transcending boundaries, non-governmental organisations and civil society play a crucial role in on-ground disaster relief. India's democratic credentials have ensured the prevalence of a vibrant civil society which has historically been a major influence in all aspects of development. The most prominent groups involved in relief activities have been organisations with religious affiliations and cross-border ethnic linkages. Table 2 provides details of one recent example, listing relief measures by Indian NGOs in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

41   See Union Budgets' "Aid for Disaster Relief" line item under "Grants and Loans to Foreign Governments," https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/previous_union_budget.php.

42   See actual expenditure for "Grants and Loans to Foreign Governments" under Union Budgets, https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/previous_union_budget.php.
     For FY 2018-19, see "Ministry of External Affairs Demands for Grants 2019-20 First Report," (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2019), p. 5, http://164.100.47.193/lsscommittee/External%20Affairs/17_External_Affairs_1.pdf.

43   "Kerala govt constitutes medical team to assist relief work in Sri Lanka," ANI, April 22, 2019, https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/kerala-govt-constitutes-medical-team-to-assist-relief-work-in-sri-lanka20190422142731/.

44   "Uttar Pradesh government offers help for quake-hit Nepal," The Economic Times, April 26, 2015, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/uttar-pradesh-government-offers-help-for-quake-hit-nepal/articleshow/47054859.cms;
     "Bihar extends helping hand to Nepal," The Hindu, April 26, 2015, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/nepal-earthquake-bihar-extends-helping-hand-to-nepal/article7143536.ece.

45   "Tamil Nadu to send aid to Sri lanka: Pranab," The Economic Times, October 26, 2008, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/tamil-nadu-to-send-aid-to-sri-lanka-pranab/articleshow/3643255.cms.

Table 2: Relief measures of some Indian NGOs post the 2015 Nepal earthquake

Organisation	Description of relief/assistance
All World Gayatri Pariwar	5,000 volunteers setup relief camps to provide shelter, food, and medical relief
Believers Eastern Church	Relief work in multiple districts of Nepal – distributing food aid and other essential relief material
Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee and Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee	25,000 food packets, blankets, and utensils
Manav Seva Sansthan	Provided 'non-food relief kits' and 'shelter and hygiene kits' to 160 families in Gorkha district of Nepal
Patanjali Yogpeeth	More than 30,000 volunteers set up 30 relief camps across 12 districts of Nepal, contributed Rs. 1 Crore of medicines and more than Rs. 5 Crore in other relief material including tents, ration, food packets, water bottles, biscuits, tea bags, milk powder, grocery material
Ramakrishna Mission	Relief provided in 12 districts of Nepal
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)	40,000 kg rice, 55,133 tarpaulins, 1,300 bags of wheat flour, 80,000 blankets, medicines, milk powder, tents, other necessities
SEEDS India	Distributed relief material including family kits for shelter, hygiene, and cooking needs; assisted in building of transitional shelters, schools, and water reservoirs

Source: News reports and scholarly publications. Please contact author for a detailed list of sources for each case.

The 2015 Nepal earthquake saw significant involvement of Indian NGOs in relief measures. Some of the most recognised and influential organisations such as the RSS and Patanjali Yogpeeth contributed through volunteers and distribution of humanitarian aid. The RSS has had a long history of participating in domestic disaster relief campaigns through its social wing called Sewa Bharati.[46] The organisation collaborated with its affiliates in Nepal for coordinating its campaign. Similarly, other religion-based organisations that contributed to relief efforts in Nepal include the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee and the Believers Eastern Church.

Many of India's other border states share people-to-people linkages with neighbouring countries due to the prevalence of common ethnicities and a history of cultural exchange. For example, 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 towards the affected Zo communities across the border.[47] Similarly, shared ethnicities play a role in cross-border exchanges between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, West Bengal and Bangladesh, and Bihar or Uttar Pradesh and Nepal.

46   Malini Bhattacharjee, Disaster Relief and the RSS: Resurrecting 'Religion' Through Humanitarianism, (New Delhi: Sage Publishing, 2019), https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/disaster-relief-and-the-rss/book270052.

47   "YMA sends rice to Mizo flood victims in Myanmar," thenortheasttoday, August 7, 2015, https://thenortheasttoday.com/archive/yma-sends-rice-to-mizo-flood-victims-in-myanmar/;
"Mizoram plans for aid, charity events for flood-affected ethnic Zo communities in Myanmar," The Indian Express, August 3, 2015, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/mizoram-plans-for-aid-charity-events-for-flood-affected-ethnic-zo-communities-in-myanmar/.

Multilateral and Regional Mechanisms: Limited Success

Although India's relief measures have mostly been bilateral, India in the past has expressed support for the global humanitarian system and endorsed the United Nations as the desired agency to coordinate assistance in this regard.[48] This is in line with India's willingness to accept a higher degree of responsibility in the global realm. Indeed, there has been a growing inclination towards engaging with international organisations while providing humanitarian assistance. Globally, India has, over the years, contributed to the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and the UNOCHA in response to various humanitarian crises. In the neighbourhood, there have been instances of funding relief programs of the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and Caritas.

However, India's humanitarian contributions to multilateral and international organisations remain relatively less significant than its bilateral assistance. India's professed endorsement of the global humanitarian aid regime has not yet translated to a substantial increase in support when it comes to extending relief to its neighbours in South Asia.[49] Table 3 details a few such cases since the 2000s.

Table 3: Assistance to international humanitarian entities by India in its neighbourhood

Year	Recipient	Affected country	Disaster type	In-kind contribution	In-kind contribution value
2002-2013	World Food Programme	Afghanistan	Conflict	300,000 tonnes of wheat and 18,000 tonnes of rice for supply of fortified biscuits to school children	US$125m
2008-09	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	Sri Lanka	Conflict	80,000 family packs of relief material provided by state of Tamil Nadu	US$5.7m
	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	Sri Lanka	Conflict	Food items and emergency shelters	US$2.8m
2010-11	World Food Programme	Pakistan	Floods	Food assistance and emergency response fund	US$25m
2011	CARITAS	Sri Lanka	Floods	Relief package including dry rations, ready to eat meals, malted food, blankets, mattresses, bed sheets, and water purification kits and tablets	US$1m

Source: Ministry of External Affairs annual reports, Food Corporation of India reports, UNOCHA FTS database, and scholarly publications. Please contact author for a detailed list of sources for each case.

In spite of strained relations with Pakistan, India provided humanitarian aid to its western neighbour on multiple occasions. India's response to the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan fostered hopes of improved relations, as apart from cash contributions, both countries agreed to open five transit points on the border to enable transfer of relief material from India.[50] This supposed improvement in relations, though, was not reflected in 2010, when Pakistan

48　András Horváth p. 5, op-cit.

49　András Horváth p. 5, op-cit.

50　Claudia Meier and C.S.R. Murthy, p. 17, op-cit.

begrudgingly accepted India's offer of assistance after a nudge from the United States. Due to domestic concerns, Pakistan asked India to route its assistance through the WFP.[51] In 2011, as Pakistan witnessed severe floods in the Sindh province, India concurred with the WFP's proposal to transfer a part of the material paid for in 2010 to the victims of the 2011 floods.[52]

India also partnered with the WFP for one of its largest humanitarian programs. Between 2002-2013, India provided wheat and rice to produce fortified biscuits for the consumption of school children in Afghanistan. The monetary value of the assistance translated to around US$125 million.[53]

Beyond global and multilateral platforms, India's overwhelmingly bilateral mode of humanitarian assistance in the neighbourhood puts forth an important question: why have regional initiatives in South Asia not featured more prominently in providing relief? Regional institutions can act as a platform to exchange crisis information, build capacity through training and exercises, and coordinate comparative advantages for

better collective action. As illustrated in the case of Nepal, greater regional coordination and cooperation are essential to complement bilateral efforts. Regional mechanisms would also mitigate concerns that smaller neighbours share about India's proactive bilateral response.

Although disaster management has been codified in policy through the establishment of institutions and ratification of agreements, its implementation remains a major challenge. No SAARC or BIMSTEC level contingent has ever been deployed in times of emergencies in South Asia. The massive response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake did not include any delegation from SAARC even though individual countries deployed their civil and military assets in the crisis area. The fact that India is a predominant power in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions places on it an extra responsibility to institutionalise regional disaster relief mechanisms. There are three avenues India has been pursuing, with varying success.

Work in progress: SAARC

The first option is to invest in prior efforts developed under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which is the preeminent organisation for intra-regional cooperation in South Asia. Although it has its share of problems, there have been successes in disaster management cooperation under its auspices.

The 2004 tsunami paved the way for setting up important cooperative measures through SAARC. A Special Session of the SAARC Environment Ministers in 2005 resulted in the establishment of an Expert Group to formulate a comprehensive

framework on early warning, disaster management, and disaster prevention. The framework, aligned with the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), also led to the formation of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC).[54] In 2016, the SDMC was remodelled as per the upgraded global standard for disaster risk reduction – the Sendai Framework, a successor to the HFA. The Sendai Framework sets out specific priorities for action along with agreed targets on reducing global disaster mortality, economic losses, and enhancing international cooperation on disaster management.

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51   Claudia Meier and C.S.R. Murthy, p. 17, op-cit.

52   "Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report 2011-12," p. 14, op-cit.

53   András Horváth p. 6, op-cit.

54   The HFA developed a set of guidelines on reducing disaster losses finalised during the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction coordinated by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. It contained targets on priority areas for the period of 2005-15. See http://saarc-sdmc.org/saarc-dm-framework.

In 2011, SAARC approved the Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARNND), which formalised a policy for a cooperative response mechanism in the region. The provisions of the SARNND included the setting up of a dedicated rapid action force for disaster management, the proposal for which was brought up at the 2014 Summit in Kathmandu. However, SAARC leaders failed to gather consensus on the issue, and this remains a point of contention.

No SAARC or BIMSTEC level contingent has ever been deployed during emergencies in the region.

SAARC also established a food bank as per a decision undertaken at the 14th SAARC Summit in Islamabad, in 2007. As part of the agreement, member states are required to ensure that the bank always stockpiles a minimum amount of food-grain for emergency usage and maintains quality.[55] However, despite multiple deliberations over the years, the bank had its first transaction only in May 2020, when the Food Corporation of Bhutan sourced a shipment of rice through it.[56]

As a regional response to the Covid-19 pandemic, India proposed a SAARC Emergency Fund and pledged US$10m for coordinating relief material in the region.[57] The fund sparked initial interest with all countries agreeing to contribute.[58] However, since its launch, most initiatives under the fund have been carried out by India to send aid to other countries.[59] In fact, the fund is not operationalised under the SAARC Secretariat, in essence making it just another Indian initiative open to all SAARC members. This again points to the lack of investment in regional, institutionalised responses, resulting in the inability of the grouping to mount a coordinated relief effort.

Bilateral and multilateral exercises to build HADR capabilities involving military assets of partner countries have also featured in India's regional paradigm. Weeks after the Nepal earthquake, PM Modi tweeted "SAARC Nations can come together & hold annual exercises of rescue teams, doctors etc on how we can minimise damage during natural disasters."[60] This signalled the initiation of the South Asian Annual Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx), the first instalment of which was organised by India in November, 2015.[61] The official purpose of these exercises is to test and synchronise inter-governmental coordination efforts to institutionalise regional cooperation on disaster response among member countries.[62] Although planned as an annual event, there have not been any further exercises since 2015.

55   "Agreement On Establishing The SAARC Food Bank," South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), 2007, https://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/N646EN.pdf.

56   India in Bhutan, *Twitter*, May 29, 2020, https://twitter.com/Indiainbhutan/status/1266221903506800642.

57   See COVID19 Emergency Fund, SAARC Disaster Management Centre (IU), http://covid19-sdmc.org/covid19-emergency-fund.

58   "Pakistan's contribution triggers debate over SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund" *The Hindu*, April 10, 2020, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pakistans-contribution-triggers-debate-over-saarc-covid-19-emergency-fund/article31303918.ece.

59   "India sends medical assistance to five friendly nations," *The Economic Times*, May 10, 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-sends-medical-assistance-to-five-friendly-nations/articleshow/75656655.cms; "Provision of essential medical supplies to Bhutan," (Thimphu: Embassy of India, Thimphu, July 29, 2020), https://indembthimphu.gov.in/event.php?id=555; "India hands over medicine, surgical gloves to Bangladesh from SAARC Covid Emergency Fund," DD News, April 26, 2020, http://ddnews.gov.in/international/india-hands-over-medicine-surgical-gloves-bangladesh-saarc-covid-emergency-fund.

60   India in Bhutan, Twitter, April 30, 2020, https://twitter.com/Indiainbhutan/status/1266221903506800642.

61   "Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report 2015-16," (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2016), p. xviii, op-cit.

62   SAARC Member Countries assemble to discuss preparations for the First South Asian Annual Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx) to be held in November 2015, (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, September 03, 2015).

Focus on the Bay of Bengal: BIMSTEC

A second option India has been pursuing is focused on the Bay of Bengal region, which has a long history of cyclone-induced disasters. This makes the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) an important player in disaster management. One of the emphasised fourteen priority areas of cooperation is "Environment and Disaster Management", with India as the lead country.

BIMSTEC presents an opportunity to build regional cooperation on disaster management given the political fault lines within SAARC. But it has largely failed to be an antidote to the region's problems. Although member countries have shown willingness to work on building capacities, and certain policies have been put together, there is still a large gap to fill in terms of building relief mechanisms. India established the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) as per a memorandum of understanding signed in 2014. The BCWC has held a workshop on building disaster-warning systems for member countries.[63] Following this, a BIMSTEC Leaders' retreat in 2016 emphasised increased disaster management cooperation with a call to set up joint exercises, resulting in the initiation of the BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise on the lines of SAADMEx. India has hosted only two editions, in 2017 and 2020.[64]

New Partnerships in the Indian Ocean Region

Finally, India's third regional approach to HADR cooperation has focused on its extended neighbourhood in the Indian Ocean. This reflects India's new Indian Ocean strategy SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), pursued by PM Modi since 2015.[65] Groupings such as the Indian Ocean Rim Organisation (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) have a history of cooperation on maritime security issues, including HADR. India chairs IORA's Core Group on Disaster Risk Management which was responsible for bringing out a set of official guidelines for HADR.[66] India also hosted the first cluster group of IORA members on disaster risk management, in February 2019.[67] This was followed by the participation of IORA member state delegates in an annual HADR exercise held later that year.[68]

Beyond IORA's multilateral framework, India has also been collaborating with other regional actors who have demonstrated HADR capabilities in the region. For example, the recently revived Quadrilateral security dialogue, formed together with the United States, Australia, and Japan, had its origins in naval HADR coordination after the 2004 tsunami. The revived and expanded Quad offers India new possibilities to reactivate cooperation on

63   BIMSTEC Centres, BIMSTEC, 2020, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=1292.

64   "First 'BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise- 2017 to begin from Oct 10," Outlook, September 19, 2017, https://www.outlookindia.com/newsscroll/first-bimstec-disaster-management-exercise-2017-to-begin-from-oct-10/1150502; "2nd Bimstec Disaster Management Exercise 2020 concludes at Puri," (press release, New Delhi, February 13, 2020), http://www.ndrf.gov.in/pressrelease/2nd-bimstec-disaster-management-exercise-2020-concludes-puri.

65   "Text of the PM's remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda," (speech, March 12, 2015), https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/text-of-the-pms-remarks-on-the-commissioning-of-coast-ship-barracuda/.

66   Disaster Risk Management, Indian Ocean Rim Association, https://www.iora.int/en/priorities-focus-areas/disaster-risk-management. "Indo-Pacific Division Briefs," (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2020), https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf.

67   "Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report 2018-19," (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2019), p. 61, http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/31719_MEA_AR18_19.pdf.

68   "Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report 2019-20," (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2020), p. 217, http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/32489_AR_Spread_2020_new.pdf.

non-traditional security issues, including HADR capacity-building and deployment procedures.[69] As the Indian Ocean region is a host to growing range and complexity of emergencies, India is also working closely with France and Australia in a trilateral format that is witnessing progressive expansion.[70] Building on these collaborations could be a crucial aspect for India to expand its capabilities to serve as a first responder beyond its subcontinental shores.

Thinking Ahead: New Emergencies

Apart from what can be called "traditional" or "recognised" forms of emergencies, 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 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. Similarly, rising dependence on technology has made cyber-attacks more threatening. These challenges make it important to rethink and broaden the scope of humanitarian crises.

India's response to the Covid-19 pandemic reflects New Delhi's intent to respond and adapt to the new context, with an immediate focus on medical relief, including critical pharmaceutical products.[71] The region's vulnerability to non-traditional emergencies should be a key aspect of India's relief strategy, before other players like China fill the regional void. A set mechanism to respond first within a 72-hour timeframe will help solidify India's primacy as a relief provider in the future. India will have to think ahead and prepare for a range of new, increasingly complex and more frequent emergencies. Responding first will require preparation and specific capabilities that can be deployed immediately. Table 4 details a range of possible emergency scenarios, along with the assistance that India could extend to its neighbours in each case, whether through bilateral or regional channels.

69   Akriti Vasudeva, "India's Role in Disaster Management: Can the Quad Give It a Leg Up?", The Stimson Center, 2019, p. 26, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Quad-R4-WEB.pdf .

70   Darshana M. Baruah, "Islands of Opportunity: Where India and Australia Can Work Together," (New Delhi: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 22, 2020), https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/22/islands-of-opportunity-where-india-and-australia-can-work-together-pub-81940 .

71   "Repatriation of foreign nationals continues even as Indians remain stranded abroad," The Week, May 02, 2020, https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/05/02/repatriation-of-foreign-nationals-continues-even-as-indians-remain-stranded-abroad.html?__twitter_impression=true

Table 4: Potential regional emergencies and assistance

Emergency Type	Type of assistance
Terrorist attacks • Physical attacks (bombing/shooting) • Cyber attacks	Deployment of expert (medical, cyber-crime) teams, forensic and other technical experts, intelligence sharing, integrating terrorism response modules into joint disaster training exercises.
Environmental emergencies • Oil spills • Locust infestations • Air pollution hazard • Heatwaves • Glacier meltdowns • Dam collapse • Geomagnetic storms	Evacuation assistance, deployment of specialist teams, provision of essential items and equipment – chemical absorbents, pesticides, protective clothing, fumigators.
Industrial accidents • Chemical explosions • Gas leaks • Nuclear reactor failures	Evacuation assistance, technical support in removal of radioactive material, provision of chemicals to dampen fission reactions.
Epidemics/Pandemics	Provision of medicines, vaccines, knowledge sharing, training and capacity building.
Ocean airplane crash	Deployment of medical teams, divers, and providing other evacuation assistance.
Space-technology related emergencies • Damage to communication satellites • Satellite disruptions due to cyber attacks	Technical assistance and information sharing.

Conclusion

India's disaster relief has gained prominence with its economic rise over the last few decades and reflects its ambition as a regional leader. India has on multiple occasions asserted its "first responder" ambition in the region, and while it has had considerable success, India will be able to further leverage goodwill from its assistance by a) improving internal processes, increasing coordination between different branches of government, as well as with state governments and civil society; and b) moving beyond a predominantly bilateral approach, and coordinate more through regional mechanisms or partnerships with multilateral bodies and friendly global partners. Internally, better coordination between its multiple departments, state governments, the media, and civil society will ensure streamlining of operations. Externally, investing in HADR issue-based partnerships will help with greater agenda-setting powers to serve neighbours in need and shape the regional order. HADR, being a relatively non-controversial point of agenda, 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. A doctrine of proactive humanitarian support for its neighbours will help India deliver more, better, and faster support during emergencies across the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions.

Policy Recommendations

- **Establish standard operating procedures and institutionalise coordination:** The case of Nepal indicates the need for clear guidelines and SOPs to reduce coordination challenges between the MEA and various other agencies. An integrated response based on mechanisms for military coordination and a clear chain of command will help with streamlining the external HADR process. The MEA's DPA-2 division should remain the nodal agency for all relief, but it requires greater expert and financial resources to be able to coordinate during emergencies. Managing different, sometimes competing, interests requires negotiations with a variety of actors, from the political leadership, to the NDMA under the Home Ministry and the Armed Forces via Ministry of Defence. State governments and civil society are also important actors. One alternative would be to centralise all efforts in the neighbourhood under the National Security Advisor and the National Security Council Secretariat, which is a more securitised and centralised model adopted by a few countries.

- **Promote responsible media coverage:** Media coverage of India's HADR operations in the neighbourhood is always sensitive and can, in some cases, lead to resentment and opposition abroad. The government should engage with journalists through briefings or workshops to promote responsible media coverage of India's relief efforts. Insensitive and jingoistic coverage of the affected country has often hindered relief efforts and proven counter-productive to India's "first responder" ambition and soft power across the region. The MEA, particularly its external publicity division, needs to engage with the media on disaster efforts with specialised training to encourage more sensitive coverage.

- **Engage with international initiatives:** India should back its intentions of playing a larger role in the global humanitarian system by furthering its involvement with multilateral organisations. A straightforward channel to do so is increasing cash and in-kind donations to UN-affiliated agencies such as CERF, WFP, and UNOCHA. This will not only help with greater agenda-setting powers in the region but also improve India's global reputation. India could also engage more proactively with international organisations such as the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) by routing more of its in-kind assistance through their channels. A fixed proportion of the annual humanitarian assistance budget can be earmarked for contributions to international organisations for this purpose.

- **Invest in regional mechanisms:** Despite the loss of political momentum within SAARC, India should not abandon important regional HADR initiatives developed since the 2000s, as reviewed in this brief. Under BIMSTEC, India should continue its investment in a range of disaster management exercises focused on the Bay of Bengal region, with the NDMA in a leading role. The Indian government could also depute an NDMA expert to the BIMSTEC Secretariat to prepare a comprehensive disaster relief plan in coordination with representatives from all member-states.

- **Deepen Indian Ocean regional partnerships:** India's ambition to respond first must go beyond the immediate subcontinent, given the expanding scope of several emergencies. India will have to operate farther from its shores and, at the same time, also work closer with other actors within its immediate neighbourhood. Specific initiatives could include a greater focus on a) the Quadrilateral dialogue with the United States, Australia and Japan on HADR exercises and capacity-building; and b) bilateral dialogues and exercises with Indonesia, other ASEAN members, France and the European Union on disaster management and relief, including capacity-building for Indian Ocean island and littoral states.

Further Readings

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