

Indonesia and India: Dealing with Disasters Together

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Summary

The devastating earthquake and tsunami in Palu, Indonesia, has thrown into focus the need for humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) cooperation in the region. Indonesia and India are embarking upon a new phase in relations based on maritime connections. HADR should be a key area of focus in Indonesia-India maritime ties.

Nature's fury knows no bounds. Palu in Indonesia witnessed that fury in late September 2018. A powerful earthquake triggered a tsunami that engulfed the town, washing away entire sections of it. In the aftermath, Indonesian authorities scrambled to provide relief and aid to those affected. As the world reacted, India was among the first responders. Three days after the tsunami struck, the Indian government launched [Operation Samudra Maitri](#) (Oceanic Friendship) to assist in the disaster response. The Indian air force and navy dispatched two aircraft and three naval ships respectively to the affected region. While Palu limps back to normalcy, this is neither the first nor the last disaster that the region will face. To deal with this threat, Indonesia and India must consider a deeper co-operation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

Maritime geography binds Indonesia and India. It is a geography prone to disasters. The eastern Indian Ocean, which connects the two, sees several cyclones every year in the Bay of Bengal. The west coast of Indonesia's Sumatra Island straddles the 'Ring of Fire', a vast geographical zone especially known as a hotbed for earthquakes and volcanoes. Climate change adds to the danger. The continued warming of ocean waters will naturally create more unstable, extreme climate patterns.

The Indian Ocean is no exception to this. It will likely to see more frequent natural disasters in the future. Associated costs will likewise shoot up. A 2005 [World Bank report](#) indicated that many of the populations of the Eastern Indian Ocean littorals are at risk of at least one natural disaster. Larger populations in high risk areas, coupled with more disasters, will naturally inflict more cost. HADR operations are the need of the hour.

In 2004, a massive earthquake off the northern Sumatran coast caused tsunamis that led to widespread devastation and immense loss of life. Around a quarter of a million people (estimated) perished, most of them Indonesian. The tsunami wreaked havoc on India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, situated in close proximity to the earthquake's epicentre. Scores of the islands' residents lost their lives and the deluge submerged a large chunk of the landmass.

At the time, India sent a total of 19 naval ships to assist Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. It also conducted a relief operation in the Andaman Sea. Since then, the Indian navy has sought to enhance HADR capabilities through domestic capacity building and

international cooperation. Recent editions of the navy's flagship, the biennial exercise MILAN in the Andaman Sea, have included also HADR operations with several countries, including Indonesia.

Likewise, for Indonesia too, HADR has become a major priority. In 2015, during the Rohingya refugee exodus, the Indonesian navy rescued several people near Aceh. Indonesia's navy spearheads Exercise Komodo, a dedicated HADR naval operation involving multilateral participation (India included) and many thousand personnel. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management is also located in Jakarta.

After prolonged mutual neglect, Indonesia and India have set out on a path towards deeper maritime engagement. Earlier this year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a landmark visit to Indonesia. During his trip, the two sides signed a ['Shared Vision of Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific'](#). The comprehensive document lays out a blueprint for a new maritime partnership. It also includes a specific section on disaster risk management that calls for geodetic data-sharing, early warning systems, and joint training exercises. A memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation, signed during the visit, also includes HADR within its scope. The new energy in India-Indonesia relations, underpinned by the maritime partnership, opens a window of opportunity to develop an effective HADR framework between India and Indonesia.

At the bilateral level, such a framework could focus upon the Andaman Sea. India and Indonesia have delimited international boundaries in the Sea. India's only tri-service command, the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), is also located there. Since 2002, the navies of both sides have conducted joint co-ordinated patrols in the sea waters. The Indian government recently turned its attention towards the ANC and efforts to strengthen its capabilities are ongoing. On the Indonesian side, the port of Sabang, at the head of Sumatra, is a nautical stone's throw away from the southern tip of the Nicobar Islands. Sabang possesses a naval air station. The 'Shared Vision' document mentions Sabang with regard to the development of port infrastructure. Bilateral HADR operations based on the dual focal points of the ANC and Sabang are certainly feasible.

As they expand co-operation in HADR, India and Indonesia should identify areas of vulnerability, create standard operating procedures for quick joint response, and develop shared infrastructure and interoperability. Jakarta and Delhi should expand the bilateral HADR framework to include their maritime neighbours in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

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