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Hope Despite Evidence: Is Disaster Diplomacy's Popularity Deserved?

<http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org>

Disaster diplomacy explores the question: Can disaster-related activities induce cooperation amongst enemy countries? Could pre-disaster actions such as mitigation and prevention and post-disaster actions such as response and recovery positively affect relations amongst states which are not normally prone to cooperation? More than two dozen case studies have been examined along with spin-offs which deviate from the strict definition of disaster diplomacy.

The main conclusion from these investigations is that evidence exists that disaster-related activities can catalyze diplomacy, but evidence does not exist that disaster-related activities can create diplomacy. Disaster-related activities can significantly spur on a diplomatic process which had a pre-existing basis, but they are unlikely to generate new diplomacy. Irrespective of such experiences, disaster diplomacy has become a populist concept especially after a disaster, promoted by the media and, at times, demanded by various actors. Is this attention unwarranted or has disaster diplomacy research so far missed key concepts which should lead to more positive conclusions?

In examining why disaster-related activities catalyze but do not create cooperation, international affairs pathways have been identified which actors could select to promote or to inhibit disaster diplomacy. As well, four questions are proposed as a test for whether or not "pure" disaster diplomacy exists:

- Have disaster-related activities led to diplomatic activities?
- Did new diplomacy emerge?
- Is the diplomacy legitimate?
- Does the diplomacy last?

Answering these questions for case studies demonstrates the different reasons for disaster diplomacy's failures—along with the rigidity and limitations which this approach introduces. Disaster diplomacy is implemented or avoided for various purposes, it occurs in different forms, and is influenced by different actors. The desire for disaster diplomacy can be a self-fulfilling prophecy or a self-unfulfilling prophecy. A balance of wide and narrow views of disaster diplomacy would help to ensure that (a) practice is based on robust research evidence and (b) focused research conclusions would not inhibit disaster diplomacy's potential in practice.