Recent developments in India's Foreign Policy by Pranab Mukherjee, India’s Minister of External Affairs

Disaster Diplomacy
Diplomats should not rely on disasters

Cultural Diplomacy
The serious objectives of Cultural Diplomacy. Cultural Diplomacy in practice in India.

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n 26 January 2001, an earthquake shook western India, killing more than 20,000 people. Almost immediately, Pakistan offered assistance which led to a summit of India’s and Pakistan’s leaders from 14 to 16 July 2001. Despite, or because of, high hopes and intense scrutiny, a final statement on the summit to be signed by both leaders could not be agreed. In the ensuing months, the two leaders exchanged vicious insults.

Coupled with other political influences—including the terrorism of 11 September 2001, the subsequent attack on and fall of the Taleban in Afghanistan, and a terrorist attack on India’s parliament in December 2001—the world feared an outbreak of hostilities between the two nuclear neighbours. Then, in March 2002, a new thaw emerged in Indo-Pakistani relations with the ‘earthquake diplomacy’ optimism of a year earlier almost forgotten.

Why did the disaster not overcome the enmity? Is this case unique or typical? These questions are answered through the “disaster diplomacy” research project (see http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org). Disaster diplomacy does not refer to instances where diplomacy breaks down, goes wrong, or does not work. Instead, disaster diplomacy explores how and why disaster-related activities do and do not reduce conflict and create peace.

The key phrase is “disaster-related activities” which refer to both pre-disaster efforts, including prevention and preparedness, and post-disaster actions, encompassing response and recovery. Disaster diplomacy has also expanded into “environmental diplomacy” seeing whether or not international environmental challenges and treaties yield diplomatic outcomes beyond the remit of the environmental issue.

All evidence so far from work on disaster diplomacy suggests that disaster-related activities can catalyze diplomacy but are unlikely to create it. In the short-term, over weeks and months, disaster-related activities frequently have the potential to affect diplomacy, but for that to happen, a pre-existing basis must exist for the reconciliation. That basis could be ongoing secret negotiations between political enemies or cultural and trade links, formal or informal.

For instance, the peace deal for Aceh, Indonesia is commonly linked to the tsunami of 26 December 2004 but, in fact, secret negotiations had started between the Indonesian government and the independence fighters just two days before the tsunami. The tsunami created conditions which permitted the peace deal to be successful, at least so far, but the tsunami did not create the peace deal. In the short-term, the disaster catalysed but did not create the diplomacy.

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 conflict or grievance should take precedence over present-day humanitarian needs, or desire for conflict.

The reality is that disasters have so far not yielded durable conflict resolution. Instead, the memory of disaster and humanitarianism soon fades, permitting the usual politics to dominate. There are even cases where a disaster threat or disaster relief has exacerbated or created
Mansura Haidar, who first initiated the language course in JMI. He also backed the initiative to launch Kazakh Department of Persian, who backed the idea of establishing the Centre for JMI, for his crucial support for the Mushirul Hasan, Vice-Chancellor of Islamia. On this occasion, Dr Uma-

Kairat Umarov opens the Centre for Kazakh Language and Studies

Ambassador of Kazakhstan Dr. Kairat Umarov opened the Centre for Kazakh Language and Studies on 29 March 2008 at Jamia Millia Islamia. On this occasion, Dr Umarov expressed his gratitude to Prof. Mushirul Hasan, Vice-Chancellor of JMI, for his crucial support for the idea of establishing the Centre for Kazakh Language and Studies. The Kazakh Envoy also thanked Prof. Qamar Ghaflar, Head of the Department of Persian, who backed the initiative to launch Kazakh language course in JMI. He also acknowledge the contribution of Prof. Mansura Haidar, who first initiated this project and has kindly arranged for a Kazakh teacher through her cooperative ties with Al-Farabi Kazakhstan National University in Almaty. The Kazakh Envoy also expressed gratitude towards Dr. Bulat Sultanov, Director, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies from Almaty for his kind presence at this august event. Mr. Umarov said that the opening of the centre is a special day, as it is for the first time that the Centre of Kazakh Language and Studies is established in India. At the initial stage, only the Kazakh language will be taught, later Professors from Kazakhstan and Indian universities would teach here.

American Gulf Coast. Cuba offered assistance. For several days, the American government did not acknowledge the offer. Then, the offer was acknowledged but not accepted.

A similar lack of influence of disaster on diplomacy is seen at other times for India and Pakistan. Cyclones devastating parts of India barely influenced rapprochement between the two states, even after incidents such as in May 1999 when Pakistani authorities rescued Indian fishermen from Gujarat following a storm. Conversely, the problems in aid management that occurred following the November 1970 cyclone in East Pakistan were one trigger for the successful war of independence that produced Bangladesh.

In October 2005, hopes for earth-quake diplomacy were revived after more than 70,000 people were killed in an earthquake disaster in the Kashmir area. While the “Line of Control” between India and Pakistan was opened briefly to permit people and supplies to cross, little movement beyond prior initiatives was seen in resolving the long-standing disputes related to the region. A cross-border bus service had already started earlier that year, so efforts to ease post-earthquake cross-border connections were an extension of previous initiatives. Meanwhile, politcal disagreements hampered the use of Indian helicopters in Pakistan for rescue and relief.

The main reason for disaster diplomacy’s continual failure is basic politics. The humanitarian imperative, the interest in avoiding disasters, and the desire for peace must compete with other priorities in political and diplomatic circles. Furthermore, linking these issues does not always lead to a successful resolution of any of them.

In fact, as seen following the 2001 earthquake disaster, ad hoc attempts at disaster diplomacy tend to collapse swiftly, causing more problems than could have been solved. Alternatively, conflict resolution should focus on the root causes of the conflict, however difficult and deep those might be, rather than assuming that a sudden event such as a disaster, or a sudden policy or decision to prevent disasters, can easily overcome long-standing enmity and concerns.

Absence of evidence for disaster diplomacy, however, is not evidence of absence of disaster diplomacy. A successful example of new diplomacy based solely on disaster-related activities may yet emerge. With the mixture of people, politics, and diplomacy, anything can happen. And then we might see headlines such as “Peace from the disaster ruins” and “Drought leads to friendship treaty”.

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