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Climate-Related Disaster Diplomacy

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In November 2001, Hurricane Michelle swept across Cuba, the most powerful storm to strike the island during Fidel Castro's reign. Excellent pre-disaster preparation and a population obedient to evacuation orders minimised casualties. Extensive damage still resulted and Cuba needed external assistance.

Despite its long-standing and sometimes violent opposition to Castro, the American government offered aid. Havana declined. That led to a month of diplomatic dancing ending with Cuba purchasing American food in lieu of donations.

Why did the disaster not overcome the enmity? Research to answer these questions is ongoing through the ["disaster diplomacy" project](http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org) (<http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org>). It explores how and why attempts to deal with disasters, before and after, do and do not create peace.

The reality is that climate-related concerns, including extreme weather, have so far not yielded durable conflict resolution. Instead, the memory of disaster soon fades, permitting the usual petty politics to dominate. There are even cases where a common climate-related threat or disaster relief exacerbates or creates conflict.

Fundamentally, politics can be so uncaring towards humanity that political grudges dominate saving lives in disasters.

Climate change, as a looming global disaster, has shown that. We have created a global, long-term disaster that needs to be addressed urgently. The acrimonious negotiations and insubstantial results show how easy it is for world leaders to dither through disagreement while the world burns.

Yet the lack of disaster diplomacy masks significant climate-related cooperation in which enemies are often engaged. Despite the animosity between their countries' governments, Cuban and American scientists have long joined forces regarding hurricanes and climate change, mainly related to modelling and monitoring. These initiatives might have continued success because the politicians and diplomats do not know that they happen and so cannot object.

The politicians and diplomats on both sides certainly object when they are involved. From the 1998 drought devastating Cuba to Hurricane Katrina striking the USA in 2005, ample opportunity existed for Cuba-USA disaster diplomacy. In all cases, both countries' leaders actively worked towards its failure.

A similar pattern is seen on the other side of the world. Cyclones devastating parts of India barely influenced rapprochement between India and Pakistan. That is even after Pakistani authorities rescued Indian fishermen from Gujarat following a storm in May 1999.

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. Aside from climate and weather, earthquakes hitting South Asia in 2001 (Gujarat) and 2005 (Kashmir) each put India-Pakistan rapprochement on a roller coaster in the short-term, but failed to contribute to the long-term successes witnessed.

A successful example of new diplomacy based solely on disaster-related activities, climate or otherwise, may yet emerge. An ethical question remains: Should disaster diplomacy be pursued? Is it fair to link disasters with peace? Since war, poverty, oppression, and injustice all contribute to disaster vulnerability, little choice exists but to work on vulnerability reduction and conflict reduction simultaneously.