

POLICY BRIEF



Natural Hazards and Political Instability in the Indo-Pacific

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The frequency and intensity of disasters is on the rise. Many countries in the Indo-Pacific region are highly vulnerable to natural hazards like droughts, earthquakes, floods, and cyclones. Accordingly, demand for Defence involvement in disaster response will grow. At the same time, great power competition in the region is intensifying, while several governments are challenged by insurgent groups and extremist movements. We study how disasters contribute to political unrest and fragility, but also analyse disaster-related opportunities for international cooperation and diplomacy.

Disasters frequently fuel discontent with the government. This can result in protests and declines in government legitimacy, opening up spaces for extremist movements and political instability. The impact of disasters on civil war is more mixed. Insurgents face significant challenges in dealing with disasters, but they can also recruit among those deprived by or aggrieved due to the disaster. Disaster risk reduction as a whole-of-government approach (including Defence) can hence be crucial for a strategy to deny access for domestic extremist groups.

Cooperation with other countries in the Indo-Pacific affected by disasters, including relief provision by Defence, plays an important role in building partnerships with other countries in the region. Particularly when well-coordinated with international partners and relevant local actors, disaster responses can enhance Australia's national interest.

THE HEADLINES

1

Disaster risks are on the rise in the Indo-Pacific and increasingly intersect with areas of political instability and geopolitical competition.

2

Insufficient disaster preparation and response can facilitate unrest and political extremism. Continuous support for allied governments in preparing for and dealing with disasters will reduce these risks.

3

Disasters can also result in temporary declines in civil war intensity, opening windows of opportunity for aid delivery, international mediation, and defence cooperation.

4

The provision of support and relief after disasters helps to improve Australia's image in the region and provides an entry point for wider cooperation. If acting in agreement with partners in the affected country, Defence can play a major role in this regard.

5

A whole-of-government approach and coordination with international partners are key to prevent disaster-related political instability and utilise diplomatic opportunities.

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METHODS

The first phase of the project conducted five case studies to assess the impact of disasters on political conflicts and civil wars in Bangladesh (2007), India (1998, 2005), and the Philippines (1990, 2013). The second phase of the project analysed how Australian provision of post-disaster support, and particularly relief provision by Defence, could benefit bilateral relations. To do so, we analysed the 2018 earthquake in Sulawesi (Indonesia) and the 2022 Tonga volcanic eruption. During both phases, we conducted an extensive review of the wider academic literature to gain insights from further cases and to make sure our results are in line with state-of-the-art scientific knowledge.

RESULTS

Disasters as Constraints to Armed Violence

Disasters frequently trigger protests associated with (perceived) insufficient disaster preparation, delayed responses, or an unfair distribution of relief. These protests are usually directed against the government or other state institutions. While they remain local in the disaster-affected areas, they are often covered by national media. Such protests and the associated grievances have the potential to undermine government legitimacy and fuel political extremism.

The impact of disasters on civil wars are more ambivalent. Particularly in cases where the government is ill-prepared and rebel groups can recruit among a poor and disaster-affected population, disasters can be a minor driver of fighting escalation. But disasters can also provide logistical constraints and create additional (disaster response) tasks for government security forces and insurgent movements. This results in a temporary reduction of fighting, which opens up opportunities for aid delivery and (as illustrated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia) diplomatic initiatives.

Strengthening the capacities of partner countries in the region to deal with disasters and providing post-disaster support can hence minimise the operating space of extremist groups and insurgents after extreme events. Such actions should be coordinated with local partners to build sovereign capacities as well as with international partners to increase synergies. A whole-of-government approach utilising insights and resources from Defence, development partnerships, classical diplomacy, and other areas is most promising.

Illustrative Case Study: The 2005 Kashmir Earthquake in India

Jammu and Kashmir, a disputed region between India and Pakistan, has a predominantly Muslim population. Political marginalisation and economic challenges led to protests against India's Kashmir policies, escalating into a civil war in 1987. In 2005, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck, causing significant damage in Kashmir. Over 1,300 died, with an economic loss of US\$ 359 million. In Pakistani

Kashmir, the impact was worse: over 73,000 deaths and infrastructure losses exceeding US\$ 5 billion.

In the year after the Kashmir earthquake, casualties in the civil war declined by 37%. Strategic constraints imposed by the earthquake played a role in this de-escalation. Pakistan-backed insurgent groups operated from the earthquake-affected Pakistani part of Kashmir. This led to significant losses in fighters, supplies, and damage to their camps. The destruction of infrastructure complicated the movement of fighters and goods across the border into India. After the earthquake, Islamist groups were also among the first responders for rescue and relief efforts in Pakistan.

With resources depleted and members engaged in recovery tasks, the Kashmir insurgents lacked the capacity to maintain their previous level of intensity. The disaster also constrained the Indian military due to infrastructure damage and the need for rescue operations. Additionally, Pakistan, a major supporter of the insurgents, faced international pressure to combat terrorism following the 9/11 attacks and the 7/7 bombings in London. This provided further incentives for insurgents to hold back, particularly as militaries from 19 countries participated in the disaster response.

Disaster Diplomacy and Cooperation between States

The disaster diplomacy approach argues that post-disaster situations are characterised by an increase in solidarity and open opportunities to build back better. Support provided and international cooperation after devastating events can strengthen bilateral ties. In the cases we analysed, Australian aid in general and the support provided by Defence in particular were welcomed by both politicians and media in the receiving countries. Particularly in Tonga, Australian support improved Australia's image (see case study below). Such cooperation supports a strategy of denial by improving Australia's image in its immediate region, hence raising barriers for rival actors to gain political influence.

In other cases, like the Sulawesi earthquake in Indonesia in 2018, such a positive effect was reduced by a politicisation of disaster relief. Opposition parties criticised the Indonesian government for accepting foreign aid, claiming that it indicates a lack of sufficient preparation and fearing there would be an obligation to reciprocate. This emphasises the need to work closely with and building long-term partnerships with national and local partners, including the armed forces of other countries.

A volatile geopolitical environment and domestic disasters are likely to further stretch the capacities of Defence in the future. Partnering with host governments and other international partners providing disaster relief in the region (e.g., France, USA, UN) as well as a whole-of-government approach to disaster diplomacy are suitable measures to mitigate capacity concerns.

Illustrative Case Study:**The 2022 Volcanic Eruption and Tsunami in Tonga**

On January 15, 2022, a massive undersea volcanic eruption and a tsunami struck the Polynesian nation of Tonga. The eruption caused extensive damage and displaced over 1,500 people. The destruction of an undersea fibre optic cable severely hampered communication, making it extremely challenging for residents to connect with each other and the outside world in the aftermath.

In response, Australia deployed over 600 Defence personnel, along with aircraft and naval vessels, to aid in disaster relief. Australian Aid, managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, further supported the relief efforts. Operation Tonga Assist delivered 88 tonnes of humanitarian supplies, including engineering, medical, and logistics equipment. The vessels served as post-disaster hospital facilities, providing electricity and safe water.

The Tongan government and media responded positively to Australia's support during the crisis. There was goodwill toward Australia for their assistance. Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni expressed gratitude for Australia's resilience and help during the arrival of HMAS Canberra in Nuku'alofa harbour. Media praised Australia's respectful cleanup of the Pangaimotu Island monument, which holds historical significance. This further emphasised the relevance of both the material and symbolic dimensions of post-disaster cooperation.

Providing disaster relief served as a starting point for deeper diplomatic engagement and stronger bilateral relations. During a joint press conference with Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong, Prime Minister Sovaleni emphasised Australia's significant role in Tonga's development. They discussed shared priorities like education, health, defence, climate change, and strengthening partnerships between Australia and the Pacific.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Expand support for countries in the Indo-Pacific to prepare for and cope with disasters. This can mitigate political instability in the affected countries and improve bilateral relations.
2. Maintain the ability of Defence to engage in disaster response operations in the Indo-Pacific, expand the relevant capacities in the face of climate change, and support them further through a whole-of-government approach and international partnerships.
3. Build long-term relationships between militaries and government agencies dealing with disasters in the Indo-Pacific nations and their Australian counterparts to strengthen sovereign disaster risk reduction abilities, to build trust, and to avoid a politicisation of Australian support.
4. Monitor the political climate when providing disaster relief, and proactively engage with major media and political actors to avoid politicisation and to improve bilateral relations with the disaster-affected country. Communicate the support provided by Australia properly.
5. Expect a short-term escalation of tensions and even insurgencies if disasters undermine government capacities and provide rebel groups with recruitment opportunities. Engage proactively with governments to provide effective disaster relief and manage potential grievances. Also monitor the safety of those involved in providing relief.
6. Expect a short-term de-escalation of fighting if disasters weaken both civil war parties and support diplomatic efforts as they are often more effective during periods of low fighting intensity. Such periods also provide windows of opportunity to deliver humanitarian aid and potential to launch diplomatic initiatives.

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This brief presents findings and policy lessons identified in a paper (De-Escalation and Diplomacy: Disasters as Drivers of Reduced Conflict Risks in the Indo-Pacific) prepared by researchers from Murdoch University through the EIR project funded by the Defence Strategic Policy Grants Program (SPGP). Brief produced by Ali Hayes, Tobias Ide, and Indah Larasati. Opinions stated in this brief and the paper it draws from, are those of authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Defence partners.

