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Super Typhoon Haiyan: ASEAN's Katrina Moment?

By Euan Graham

Synopsis

Super-Typhoon Haiyan, which devastated large areas of the central Philippines on 8 November, may be seen in future as an exemplar for multinational naval Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. Yet the relief effort is being led by extra-regional states, with ASEAN's navies largely absent.

Commentary

THE UNFOLDING international response to Typhoon Haiyan, in the same super-destructive league as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and Japan's 2011 triple disaster, has again underscored the naval dimension to Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in Asia. The United States, United Kingdom and Japan have all deployed military assets commensurate with their large civilian aid efforts.

ASEAN's Secretary General visited Tacloban on 22 November 2013, to convey in person that "ASEAN is one community and we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Philippines in this very difficult time." Several ASEAN members have also deployed defence assets, bilaterally, to support the relief operation. However, ASEAN itself has been slow to react. This is odd, considering the high-profile attention given to HADR cooperation within ASEAN itself, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ADMM Plus.

Naval assets in HADR

Indeed, the HADR response was primarily led by ASEAN's regional and international partners as they deployed their naval vessels and aircraft to assist the Philippines. To be sure, naval assets are only one part of the HADR toolkit, which remains civilian-led, though navies are often first on scene. As displayed by the US, UK and Japan, they bring ready-made capabilities and skilled personnel for damage assessment, delivering emergency supplies directly to where they are needed most, and search and rescue. Ship-based command and communications can be vital for coordinating the wider relief effort when land-based civilian infrastructure is not up to the task.

Navies' ability to operate autonomously offshore for long periods confers unique advantages. It can help overcome land-based logistical bottlenecks. Politically, it can also mitigate the sensitivities of local populations towards a foreign military presence in the initial chaotic stages. Beyond the "first response" phase, a floating presence just out of sight gives stretched relief workers and vulnerable evacuees temporary respite in a safe "rear area" that carries its own force protection.

As was the case during the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, a nearby US aircraft carrier and its accompanying escorts were able to respond quickly. The USS George Washington carrier group commenced relief operations near Samar and Leyte on 14 November, ferrying emergency supplies to affected areas. The carrier alone can produce 1.5 million litres of fresh water daily.

The 21 helicopters within its group, augmented by US Marine MV-22B Ospreys deployed from Okinawa, are providing an indispensable front-end airlift capability for the relief effort, easing bottlenecks in aid distribution that are compounded by the Philippines' limited infrastructure and insular geography. The US Navy's hospital ship USS Mercy will join the relief effort after crossing the Pacific.

The UK Royal Navy, after a prolonged absence from the region, was also fortuitously well placed to respond. HMS Daring, a Type-45 destroyer, already present in the South China Sea for a Five Power Defence Arrangements exercise, was diverted to the Philippines and has begun delivering assistance near Cebu. HMS Illustrious, with a complement of seven helicopters, has also been diverted from the Gulf and will relieve Daring shortly.

While Illustrious brings far more capability to the disaster zone, the fact that Daring and her crew were able to respond immediately is a good advertisement for the flexibility of other ships to serve in the HADR role, though dedicated training for such missions is essential.

Where is ASEAN?

The naval element will also be prominent in what promises to be Japan's largest peacetime overseas deployment of the Self Defence Forces (SDF), involving 1,100 personnel, 16 military aircraft and three ships, including the flat-topped JDS Ise, which can carry several helicopters and a large volume of stores. Japan's HADR contingent could not be dispatched until formally requested by the Philippines, even though defence cooperation between Tokyo and Manila has expanded recently. However, SDF vessels have now arrived in the Philippines. China's modest financial contribution to the relief effort generated international criticism although China's navy has belatedly dispatched a navy hospital ship to the Philippines.

The more surprising omission is ASEAN, given its focus on HADR since the Indian Ocean tsunami. An ARF disaster relief exercise in Thailand this May was designed to improve "participants' ability to rapidly provide coordinated and effective disaster relief". In June, Brunei and Singapore co-hosted a combined military medicine/HADR exercise, with participation from all ten ASEAN members. The exercise aimed specifically "to enhance interoperability and understanding through cooperation and contribution of military assets and personnel from ADMM-Plus nations."

Singapore's air force has delivered relief supplies to Tacloban and Cebu and, at the request of the Philippine military, has extended the deployment of the second of its C-130 transports. Brunei has announced the dispatch of a patrol vessel and fixed-wing aircraft, while Thailand has offered to provide a C-130 transport and medical assistance. Indonesia is contributing US\$2 million in aid and sent 3 C-130 aircraft to distribute it.

Urgent need for ASEAN Quick Response team

Beyond such bilateral initiatives, however, there is little public evidence of an ASEAN-led coordinated effort translating into contributions of defence assets from member states, despite the Secretary General's dual-hatted position as ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator.

The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management, based in Jakarta, pre-positioned personnel in the Philippines shortly before the typhoon made landfall. On 10 November, the centre announced that it would share its assessment with "ASEAN member states and potential assisting entities to help them deciding the types of assistance to be provided".

However, comments attributed to the Thai and Indonesian foreign ministers at a press conference in Bangkok on 14 November suggested some frustration that ASEAN's response was materialising more slowly than that from extra-regional countries. Thai Foreign Minister Surapong proposed that "A quick response team is needed for ASEAN, the 10 countries have human resources and enough equipment, so it is time to share and cooperate".

At the national level, ASEAN has the requisite capabilities to respond to the international HADR effort in the Philippines. Moreover, the scale of devastation there means that even niche contributions will be useful, beyond the naval and airlift assets committed by the US, UK, Japan and others.

Having made HADR the centrepiece of recent defence cooperation exercises, if ASEAN does not respond more

convincingly to the real-life disaster in the Philippines, it risks missing its "Hurricane Katrina moment". Haiyan may have passed, but its damaging potential remains.

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