

Super-typhoon Haiyan: ASEAN's Katrina Moment?

by Euan Graham

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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 importance of the naval dimension to Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations across the Indo-Pacific. The US, UK, and Japan have all deployed military assets commensurate with their large civilian aid efforts. Several ASEAN members have also deployed defense assets, bilaterally, to support the relief operation. ASEAN itself has been slow to react, however. This is odd, considering the high-profile attention given to HADR cooperation within ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ADMM Plus.

Naval vessels and aircraft are only one part of the HADR toolkit but they are often the first assets on scene. They bring ready-made capabilities and skilled personnel for damage assessment, delivering emergency supplies, and conducting search and rescue. Ship-based command and communications can be vital for coordinating the wider relief effort, particularly when land-based civilian infrastructure is not up to the task. Moreover, the ability to operate autonomously offshore for long periods gives navies unique advantages. It can help overcome land-based logistical bottlenecks. Politically, it can mitigate the sensitivities of local populations toward 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 Nov. 14, ferrying emergency supplies to affected areas. The carrier alone can produce 1.5 million liters of fresh water daily. The 21 helicopters within its group, augmented by US Marine *MV-22B Ospreys* deployed from Okinawa, will provide 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 Defense Arrangement 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* later this month. While *Illustrious* brings far more capability to the disaster zone, the fact that *Daring* was able to respond immediately is a good advertisement for the flexibility of other ships to serve in the HADR role. Its desalination plant and single *Lynx* helicopter can provide time-critical support upfront. The Royal Navy's commitment to HADR operations means the ship's crew are well trained and bring useful medical and engineering skills. An official from the Department for International Development has been lodged onboard to help coordinate the civil-military relief effort – for which the British government has thus far pledged £50 million.

The naval element will also be prominent in what promises to be Japan's largest peacetime overseas deployment of the Self-Defense 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 defense cooperation between Tokyo and Manila has expanded recently. SDF vessels are due to arrive in the Philippines on Nov. 22.

China's modest financial contribution to the relief effort has generated international criticism. China's absence from the line-up of participating navies should come as no surprise, however, given recent tensions between Manila and Beijing over the South China Sea. The more glaring 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 10 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. Beyond these bilateral initiatives, however, there is little public evidence of an ASEAN-led coordinated effort translating into

contributions of defense assets from member states. 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 Nov. 10, the center 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 Nov. 14 suggested frustration that ASEAN’s response was materializing more slowly than that from extra-regional countries.

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 centerpiece of recent defense 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. Fortunately, there is still time to act.

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