



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 213 | May 13, 2013

Japan's Disaster Relief Diplomacy: Fostering Military Cooperation in Asia

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Hideshi Futori, recent Japan Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “First, the realm of HA/DR is a rare opportunity for Japan to actively engage in military cooperation with China.”

By strategically utilizing its evolving disaster relief diplomacy, Japan will increasingly be able to contribute towards the goal of a more stable and peaceful international order throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, disaster relief operations that utilize military assets have the potential of institutionalizing a regional framework for broader military cooperation. In addition to being the economic dynamo of the global economy, Asia is also highly prone to natural disasters. Earthquake, tsunamis, typhoons and other disasters negatively impact developed and developing countries alike. Japan, a country all too familiar with the human suffering and economic impact from natural disasters, can be a role model for the region in responding to these devastating “acts of God” through a combination of its technical know-how and considerable military assets. Last year, for the first time, Asian defense spending surpassed that of European states. However, Asia does not yet have a multilateral security institution such as NATO for joint operations. Now is the time to consider one for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) in Asia, and Japan is well positioned to take a leading role in such a multilateral institution.

Japan's Active Disaster Relief Diplomacy

Since the Japan Disaster Relief (JDR) team law was enacted in 1987, and which was later amended in 1992 to allow Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to participate in international disaster relief operations, the country has assisted in a number of international HA/DR operations. In total, since the first SDF deployment in 1998, Japan's military has conducted 13 overseas HA/DR operations, including Haiti in 2010 and New Zealand in 2011. Furthermore, since 2012, Japan's Ministry of Defense has been sharing HA/DR expertise with other militaries in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, East Timor and Cambodia. This capacity-building support program has the potential to significantly strengthen strategic bilateral relationships between the militaries of Southeast Asia and Japan's SDF.

From 2001 to 2011, Japan has provided approximately \$55 billion in overseas development assistance towards international disaster related projects including technical assistance, grant- and loan-based aid and emergency relief projects. In addition, Japan took a leading role in 1998 in the creation of the Asian Disaster Reduction Center in Kobe city, and by chairing the United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction in 2005, a role that it will hold again in 2015. Japan has also provided funds and dispatched experts to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management which was launched in 2011 in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Japan's Multilateral Military Cooperation with ASEAN-led Initiatives

Japan is already an active participant in US-led regional military exercises that have a HA/DR component, including Cobra Gold, Cope North, Pacific Partnership and the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC). There are other ASEAN-led military exercises which only focus on HA/DR operations, and again Japan is a leading participant including in the

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ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Field Exercise (ARF-DiREx) which was first initiated in 2009. This ARF-led exercise was considered a landmark move as a transition from dialogue to practical cooperation amongst regional militaries, and furthermore, China was a participant. Prior to this, China had a tendency to shy away from HA/DR exercises that were led by the United States, but to date, China has participated in both the 2011 ARF-DiREx and the May 2013 exercise.

Additionally, there are related initiatives including the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). Within the ADMM-Plus, Experts’ Working Groups (EWG) were established in 2011 to discuss areas for mutual cooperation including within the realm of HA/DR and Military Medicine. China is currently a co-chair of the HA/DR EWG, and Japan co-chairs the Military Medicine EWG. Since the beginning these two EWGs have worked closely together and also made arrangements for their own multilateral HA/DR exercise in 2013. The third meeting of the two EWGs took place this past January in Singapore. Both Chinese and Japanese military representatives joined the meeting and worked together on HA/DR cooperation despite heightened tensions over their territorial dispute, something that was not widely reported in the media.

China's Growing Naval Capabilities and Disaster Relief Diplomacy

China has rapidly promoted the modernization and expansion of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) since the early 1990s. In December 2004, former Chinese President Hu Jintao enunciated “New Historic Missions” for China’s military, which broadened the definition of national security beyond China’s immediate territorial waters, with plans to expand into non-traditional security paradigms. Two days after President Hu’s statement, Southeast and South Asia were impacted by a devastating tsunami brought upon by a powerful earthquake in the Indian Ocean. Whereas the United States, India, Australia and Japan had the capacity to take a leading role in regional HA/DR operations in the immediate aftermath of this tragedy, China did not.

After this negative experience with the 2004/05 tsunami relief effort, China has sought to transform both the capacity and capabilities of the PLAN to respond to future HA/DR contingencies. One prominent example of this is China’s launch of a hospital ship, the Peace Ark, in 2008. Its first deployment was to five African and Asian countries in 2010 and the second was to Cuba in 2011. China has added other assets, including amphibious ships, air-cushion landing crafts and an aircraft carrier, all indispensable components for conducting HA/DR operations in distant waters.

Implications for Japan

Considering China’s growing naval capabilities, there are at least two implications for Japan. First, the realm of HA/DR is a rare opportunity for Japan to actively engage in military cooperation with China. As the PLAN improves its blue water capabilities and China’s role in international HA/DR operation increases, there is ample scope for increased cooperation between the Chinese and Japanese militaries. This in turn has the potential to build mutual trust, and reduce misunderstanding and miscalculation between the two neighbors.

Secondly, Japan will be better able to hedge against China’s regional influence by promoting closer Sino-Japanese HA/DR cooperation into broader regional-led initiatives. The ASEAN-led multilateral framework and practical cooperation incorporated in the ADMM-Plus and ARF initiatives is a perfect venue for this convergence into a more stable regional institutional framework. Japan’s disaster relief diplomacy is one very practical avenue for Japan to take a leading role in ensuring that China’s rise will progress toward a peaceful and prosperous future in the Asia-Pacific region.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

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