



Disaster Diplomacy: A Brief Review

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Introduction

There are stories—most likely encompassing both history and myth—of devastating floods in early Chinese civilization. These record the effects on the Yellow River of 9 years of heavy rain, and how, every spring, it would overflow its banks and wipe out entire clans and villages. In response, a young man named Yu was ordered to tame the river. Yu's father had been given the same mandate, but unfortunately failed and was executed. For years Yu surveyed the river and decided that a vast array of channels, rather than the dams of his father, could provide a solution. Such an engineering project, however, presented a large problem, a diplomatic problem. In order to succeed, Yu would have to convince hundreds of rival clans all along the Yellow River to set aside years of hostilities and work together in order to solve the problem of the river. (Marr 2012) Yu's diplomatic endeavour was based on the hope that opposing communities with a shared-risk would be able to look past their differences in the face of disaster. It was diplomacy with the effects of a disaster at its center. This question of "disaster diplomacy" is still relevant today. It is a question that asks whether or not the window of opportunity found within a disaster can actually bring about permanent transformation where conflict once prevailed.

Diplomacy in recent history has changed. The number of international conflicts has declined, but the number of internal conflicts has increased, which has caused shifts in diplomatic expectations. (Regnier 2011) Perceptions of "disaster" have also changed; no longer are they identified as "natural." (Kelman 2011, Renner and Chafe 2007) There is nothing natural about the disaster that occurs after a hazard—earthquake, flood, volcanic eruption, etc.—hits a population. It is not natural due to the inequalities that exist because of structural world problems. The academic research surrounding this notion understands it to be "structural violence," an idea that originated with Johan Galtung in 1969. He claimed that a narrow understanding of violence—the physical affects on mortality and morbidity—is not sufficient if true peace was to be attained in society. He wrote that violence needed to be understood as "present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations." (Galtung 1969, p.168) Poverty, therefore, is considered to be an expression of structural violence because it keeps populations from their potential. These structural problems are part of the complex story that exists before a disaster occurs. It is also what contributes to the shift in understanding the effects of disasters to no longer being "natural." In 2010, large earthquakes hit both Haiti and Chile. The less developed and more poverty stricken Haiti had the higher mortality rate even though its earthquake was of a less magnitude than Chile's (7.0 compared to 8.8). (Smith and Florez 2010) Poverty creates a weaker infrastructure that implies complexities in responding to disasters because of all the complexities that existed before. They range from environmental conditions to corruption and structural challenges. (Pelling and Dill 2008) All these also play an assumed part in diplomatic efforts post-disaster; and even though they may seem to complicate efforts, they do not take away the fact that the intersection of disaster and a factor of shared-risk in opposed communities

can offer a possibility for transformation between them. The question is whether “disaster diplomacy” can be used as an avenue for peace between these opposed communities. This paper seeks to review the current field of literature surrounding disaster diplomacy and to assess its efficacy in promoting peace and reducing conflict.

Disaster Diplomacy

Definitions

Disaster diplomacy combines two fairly common words. The *Oxford Dictionary's* definition of “disaster” is “a sudden accident or natural catastrophe that causes great damage or loss of life.” (oxforddictionaries.com) However, as stated above, it is no longer correct to understand disasters are natural since their affects are far from it. The second word, “diplomacy,” has a wide possibility of definitions. On a basic level it is contrasted with war as the peaceful side of politics, where negotiation is the avenue of choice for change. When the two words are brought together, it is in an attempt to answer the question of whether or not diplomacy as an *international* agent can actually make a difference in present and future conflicts/disasters that involve *heterogeneous* actors. (Jonsson and Aggestam 2009) In other words, can diplomatic opportunities brought on by disasters make any difference for peace among these heterogeneous actors?

The main body of research surrounding disaster diplomacy originates with Ilan Kelman, who contributed to numerous reports and articles on disaster diplomacy, all of which culminated in the 2011 publication of the only book on disaster diplomacy, *Disaster Diplomacy: How Disasters Affect Peace and Conflict*. The premise behind Kelman's view of disaster diplomacy is identifying whether disaster-related activities provide opportunities to induce cooperation between adversarial countries or communities. (Kelman 2012) These opportunities manifest themselves in the time both before and after a disaster, which means that any goodwill collaboration due to disaster-related activities is understood to be a part of disaster diplomacy. As an illustration of pre-disaster-related activity, Kelman frequently uses the collaboration of American and Cuban scientists towards better provision of hurricane monitoring systems. (Kelman 2010) The potential outcomes, however, are variable and difficult to predict, a fact the section on case studies below makes evident.

Assessment of Success

The general assessment Kelman presents in his research is that disasters provide a *catalyst* for transformation but do not *create* it. (Kelman 2006; Kelman 2007a, Kelman 2007b) As a result of various case studies, Kelman discovered that disaster diplomacy typically follows three possible outcomes: short term, long term, and the opposite desired effect. Short term outcomes occur when the disaster provides new avenues for negotiation between opposing parties. However, for this to be successful there needs to be an existing foundation for

negotiation. Long term outcomes find that pre-existing prejudices are strong factors in diplomacy and that memory of collaboration during the disaster quickly fades. Within outcomes that produce the opposite desired effect—diplomatic efforts backfire and conflict is inflamed. (disasterdiplomacy.org, Kelman 2006, Kelman 2011) In spite of potentially negative outcomes, the fact remains that response to disasters normally bring opposing communities together for a short time. (Werker 2010) Eric Werker (2010) wrote an article on disaster politics for *Harvard International Review* that acknowledged this window of opportunity, but then asked what the barrier might be to realising the potential for this window. A few of the barriers he cited are donor bias, donor fatigue, and the “CNN Effect” (where the media sensationalises a disaster only for a short time). The biggest issue, however, is politics and how they sweep back into play almost immediately after a disaster, when the hope would be for continued a-political involvement. Kelman’s research offers similar assessments to those of Werker. On one level, reconciliation has never been a priority when responding to disasters, which leads to a lack of political forethought and the subsequent likelihood that diplomatic initiatives will fail. (Kelman 2012, Kelman 2011) These barriers to diplomatic process are rooted in the much deeper conceptual debate surrounding the marriage or divorce of politics with humanitarian action. According to purists—typically the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), and Medecins San Frontieres (MSF)—humanitarian action can only be termed as such if its space is devoid of politics. This is due to an understanding of humanitarianism as responsive action (to both disasters and complex emergencies) that ensures the “equal dignity” of all human beings. The only way this can be done is through impartiality due to its implication “that assistance is based solely on need, without discrimination among recipients because of nationality, race, religion, or other factors.” (Terry 2002, p. 19) This humanitarian imperative demands that any disaster-related activity should be free of politics. (Kelman 2012, *The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* 2003) Disaster diplomacy, therefore, should not even be an option because its directive lies outside the mandate of humanitarian action. The other issue on this level is, again, the media. The hype or “CNN Effect” can derail goodwill by setting unattainable standards.

Related Terms

The debate surrounding the role—or non-role—of politics in disaster-related activities will rage on for years. The debate, however, has not halted the search for a way to use the opportunity presented by disasters for change. An article in the *International Review of the Red Cross* identified two other terms—humanitarian diplomacy and intervention diplomacy—as related to disaster diplomacy. (Regnier 2011) All three variations originate from similar motivations, yet vary in actors and outcomes. The IFRC adopted a “Humanitarian Diplomacy Policy” in 2009 in which they described Humanitarian Diplomacy as “persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles.” The IFRC understands that the decision to

engage on behalf of effected populations is not a choice, but a responsibility. (IFRC 2009) The second term, intervention diplomacy, is the least related of the two to disaster diplomacy. Beyond its brief mention in Regnier’s article, it is difficult to find any research that combines intervention with diplomacy. The point of convergence in Intervention Diplomacy is that the act of intervention is used to mitigate problems that arise from conflict or disasters, which by definition is not necessarily “diplomacy.” According to an article in the *Naval Law Review* (1997), “The Emerging Norm of Humanitarian Intervention,” the authors understand “intervention” on humanitarian grounds to be “feeding the hungry and caring for the sick if the organisation or government does not receive cooperation from the host government.” (p. 6) The meaning suggests that intervention diplomacy is unsolicited action on behalf of an effected population by an outside organisation or government that has not received an invitation to do so.

Although each of these terms is related to disaster diplomacy, neither addresses the possibility of reconciliation between two opposing parties when they are met with shared-risk. Disaster diplomacy is the only option whose actions are horizontal—including effected populations in its deliberations—rather than vertical—deliberating on behalf of populations.

Case Studies

Case studies hold the key to discovery of disaster diplomacy’s efficacy. Most of the cases in the current literature surrounding disaster diplomacy are situated between inter-national governments or in intra-national clashes. Currently, there is no research within the main body of literature that addresses disaster diplomacy within local communities. The table below represents a brief overview of cases attributed to disaster diplomacy. Each case will be featured below in order to bring to the foreground points that are connected to either the successes and/or failures of the disaster diplomacy agenda. The case studies are grouped according to Kelman’s three observational outcomes: the short term, long term, and opposite desired effect.

Table 1. Disaster Diplomacy Case Studies

Name	Disaster	Level	Outcome
Aceh	Tsunami 2004	Intra-National	Short Term Effective
Falkland Islands	Falkland War	Inter-National	Long Term Effective
Greece/Turkey	August/September Earthquakes 1999	Intra-National	Short Term Effective
Goma (DRC)	Volcano 2002	Inter-National	Short Term/Long Term Effective
Kashmir	Earthquake 2005	Inter-National	Long Term Effective
North Korea/West	Droughts	Inter-National	Long Term Effective
Sri Lanka	Tsunami 2004	Intra-National	Opposite Desired Effect
US/Cuba	Hurricanes	Inter-National	Long Term Effective

Short Term Outcomes

Aceh

Aceh is located in the northwestern province of Sumatra, Indonesia, and was one of the worst hit areas during the 2004 tsunami. The history of Aceh has been one of conflict since the Aceh Freedom Movement (GAM) was formed in 1976. The first uprising was quickly suppressed, but GAM continued to gain prominence due to the numerous human rights violations caused by the military. Resistance continued until 1998 when the Suharto military dictatorship ended. In the time between 1998 and 2004, when the Tsunami occurred, three critical events laid a strong foundation for the possibility of peace. The first was the de-militarization of Indonesia. The second occurred when parliament passed a law in 2004, which required the military to divest of all business ventures. The third occurred when the military was no longer able to reserve seats in parliament. The tsunami hit on Christmas of 2004 and served as a catalyst that assured a collective determination to reach peace. (Renner and Chafe 2007) The result was a lasting peace treaty signed in the aftermath of the tsunami. There are numerous efforts in place to continue upholding this peace, and although sustaining it has not been easy, the peace treaty signed is still in place.¹ (Gelling 2009)

Turkey and Greece

Diplomatic relations between Turkey and Greece in recent history has been full of tension, a tension stemming from disputes over the island of Cyprus. Any goodwill that had existed between the two countries dissipated when war almost broke out in 1974, when Turkey invaded Cyprus. The resulting effect found Cyprus split into a Greek side and Turkish side, a situation that has survived to this day. (Ker-Lindsay 2000) The contentious relationship between the countries began to change in 1999, when an earthquake hit Turkey in August and another hit Greece in September. The quick response from each country to the other resulted in goodwill among government leaders and the general population. (Kelman 2011) In this case, disaster diplomacy opened the way for better ties between both the governments of each country and the people. (Ker-Lindsey 2000) Kelman, however, attributes the success of their efforts to luck rather than disaster diplomacy. This is because goodwill created after a disaster can make expectations for immediate reconciliation very high, which means that the longer reconciliation takes, the less likely it will be successful. The time between the sowing of goodwill between Turkey and Greece and their eventual improved relationship took long enough that Kelman believed there was a higher risk of no improvement rather than the improvement that did occur. (Kelman 2012a)

¹ Further research of Disaster Diplomacy and the peace process of Aceh:

a) Renner, M and Chafe, Z. 2007. *Beyond Disasters: Creating Opportunities for Peace. Worldwatch Report.* Washington, D.C.: Worldwatch Institute.

b) Gaillard, J., Clavé, E. and Kelman, I. 2008. 'Wave of Peace? Tsunami disaster diplomacy in Aceh, Indonesia,' in *Geoforum* 39(1), pp. 511-526.

Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

In January 2002, Mount Nyiragongo erupted in the conflict-ridden district of Goma in the DRC. Prior to the eruption, most southern African nations were involved in the conflict in Goma and sent troops to fight either for or against the government in Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC. At the time of the eruption, the rebel group RCD (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie) was in control of Goma. The government in Kinshasa was not allowed to provide aid directly as a result of the conflict, but was able to get aid through indirectly with assistance from the United Nations (UN). By the beginning of February, it was apparent that many of the countries involved in the conflict were getting aid into the affected community through international organizations. (Wisner 2002, disasterdiplomacy.org) Then, in early February, Mai Mai (a rebel group) approached the UN offering a ceasefire and requesting to join the DRC peace process. They were among the groups who signed the peace agreement in April that year, however it is not clear whether or not it was the eruption of the volcano that caused the sudden desire to support the peace process. (disasterdiplomacy.org)

Long Term Outcomes

Falkland Islands

On April 2, 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, a UK colony off the coast of Argentina for over 150 years, which led to a brief war. (BBC News) The UK retained control of the Falkland Islands in spite of Argentina's invasion and tensions between the countries have continued until today. Even though these tensions still define much of their current relationship, there is evidence of collaboration and goodwill between the two countries as a result of what looks like disaster diplomacy. Search and rescue exercises held in November 2004 gave rise to an opportunity for collaboration between the two militaries, an opportunity that was met with success. This proved that it was possible for Argentina and the UK to work together positively. (Brock 2004) However, there has been no further success beyond collaboration for search and rescue, and the current relationship is still impeded by the memory of the Falkland War and the desire to claim or defend ownership. (Buenos Aires Herald 2012, Radzischewski 2012)

India and Pakistan: Kashmir

The province of Kashmir is highly disputed land between India and Pakistan, which contributes to poor relations between the two countries. However, many assumed an opportunity for forward movement arrived with the October 8, 2005, earthquake in the Pakistan controlled part of Kashmir. Nevertheless, rather than dissipating mistrust and furthering the possibility of peace, the countries reacted selfishly (saving their own citizens before the others) and the possibility that what could result from humanitarian collaboration did not come to fruition. (International Crisis Group 2006) Despite some goodwill in existence after the earthquake,

(Renner and Chafe 2007) cool relations still exist and no further progress has been made. (Kelman 2007b)

United States and Cuba

The case study of the relationship between United States and Cuba is a favorite of Kelman's. (Kelman 2011, Kelman 2012, Kelman 2007a, Kelman 2007b) In his work, he chronicles the relationship between the United States and Cuba over the past few years according to any changes resulting from disaster-related activities. These began with the Cuban drought in 1999, and continued through Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In almost every case it appeared that political self-interest trumped the humanitarian needs. (Kelman 2007b) The countries would take turns offering support during a disaster and subsequently declined the help offered. At times, the help offered was not even acknowledged. (Kelman 2012) Even though it would appear that there has been ample opportunity to build bridges in the relationship between these countries, every opportunity was rejected. On a smaller level, however, there has been collaboration between American and Cuban scientists as they work together towards more effective hurricane warning systems. (Kelman 2010)

North Korea and Western Countries

The relationship between North Korea and the Western world is notoriously rocky. However, in the past two decades there have been opportunities—on humanitarian grounds—to possibly improve these relations, the most recent of which occurred early in 2012. The first chance came in 1995, when the West responded with aid to a drought in North Korea on the condition that North Korea would attempt to change its ways. This did not occur. (Kelman 2007a) Then there came a chance early this year during another drought that struck North Korea in March. The condition attached to the aid this time was that North Korea abandon its nuclear ambitions. Aid was withdrawn when North Korea set off a missile a month later. (Kelman and Galliard 2012) The opportunity for peaceful collaboration was ignored, yet again, in favor of political ambitions.

The Opposite Desired Affect

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a history of tensions and civil violence that stretch back years and is the result of colonial influences. The relationship between Tamil population and the rest of Sri Lanka provides the clearest example of these influences. Due to those of Indian Tamil origin being colonized as separate from the rest of Sri Lanka, it has since understood itself not only as separate, but also of more worth. As a result, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam formed and aggressively fought for independence. It is against a backdrop of violence, then, that the devastating floods of 2003 and the 2004 Tsunami occurred. After the flooding in 2003 that resulted from heavy monsoon rain in the south of Sri Lanka, the Tigers donated aid to the

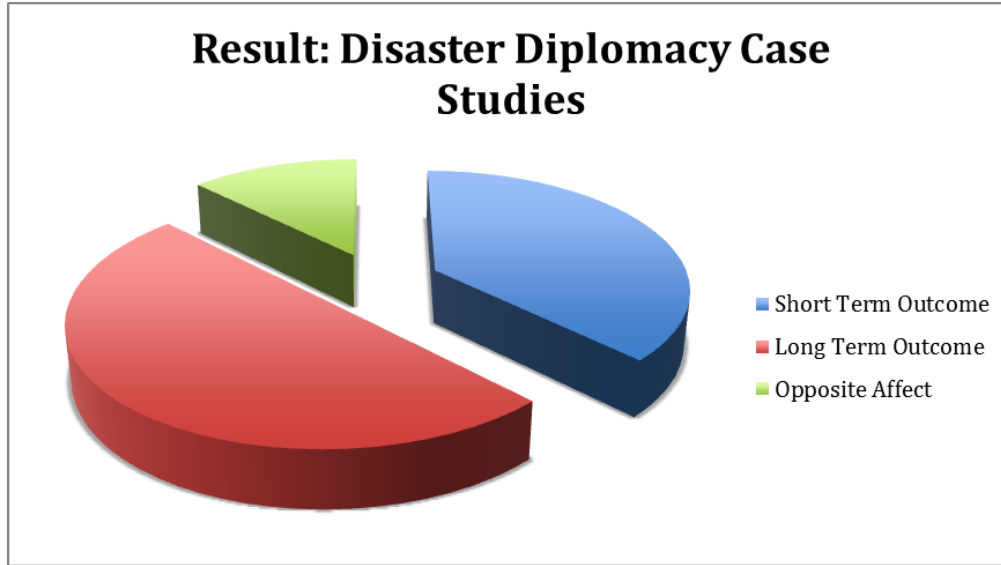
affected populations in what seemed to be an act of goodwill. (Kelman 2012) However, when the Tsunami hit in 2004, the hope for peace that began in 2001 was shattered by the government's decision to refuse aid from Tamil as well as not providing access to Tamil areas by outside organizations. These decisions solidified existing divisions in the country rather than taking the opportunity to heal them. (Renner and Chafe 2007) The opportunity for disaster diplomacy failed on both accounts.

Analysis

Three points become apparent about the academics of disaster diplomacy and its case studies. First, is represented below in Table 2—the majority of cases reveal that disaster diplomacy has been unsuccessful. Second, the main barrier is political motivation, and third, each case takes place either on an inter-national or intra-national (between strong internal players) level, the local level is relatively ignored. (See Table 2)

Kelman (2012) writes that “disasters do not usually provide a window to address long term international concerns.” (p. 12) The fact, however, that not *every* case study above proved unsuccessful gives hope of the success disaster diplomacy could bring, but perhaps from a different perspective. Louise Comfort (2000) wrote a paper entitled, “Disaster: Agent of Diplomacy or Change in International Affairs?” in which she explores Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS)—a model that accounts for changes unique to nations exposed to or affected by disaster through incorporating a nonlinear, non-hierarchical understanding of the complex (social, economic and political) actors involved—as a tool for ensuring successful results through disaster diplomacy-type efforts. It is undeniable that disasters provide a unique opportunity for a change in the relationship of those that have a shared risk, however, a guide is needed to know how best to transform these relationships. Comfort argues that the key to success is on the micro level before any lasting change can happen on the macro level. She postulates that CAS is an effective approach because by nature it accounts for the difference in “ideas, materials, and skills” found within each separate case. (p. 30) The implementation of CAS would necessitate a greater involvement of aid agencies due to the need to be aware of local divisions when responding to specific situations. (Renner and Chafe 2007) A problem arises here because of the political argument within the aid world; any involvement of aid agencies in activities that are termed as outside of the humanitarian imperative are considered political, and therefore outside their mandate. In spite of these problems, it seems that the full range of disaster diplomacy's usefulness has yet to be researched. Kelman writes that just because there are not any entirely successful known examples, does not mean they do not exist. (Kelman 2006)

Table 2. Results of Case Studies



Conclusions

The introduction to this paper presents Yu, a young man who was tasked with the control of the menacing Yellow River. The success of his efforts and the responsibility to save lives rested on the diplomatic mission of getting rival clans to collaborate. This involved diplomacy in the face of disaster. According to the research, Yu should not have had been successful, because there had been no diplomatic ties existing as a foundation for continued collaboration. Also, if his plan did not work, the opposite effect might occur, tensions would have risen and conflict would have continued. The story, however, did not end as such. The fear of the river overruled centuries of hostility, and the clans agreed to come together under this project. The stories say it took thirteen years to complete the channels, and that when the rains came and the river swelled, that Yu's plan was a success. The clan leader who originally appointed Yu named him his successor. Many in China now attribute Yu with being the leader of the first dynasty because he was able to bring everyone together in order to fight the floods. (Marr 2012)

Disaster diplomacy recognises an opportunity to bring communities together who have a shared risk of disaster. The research, however, goes no further than to attribute it catalysing action as opposed to creating action. So far, this research only encompasses high-level cases in which politics are always in danger of taking control. Therefore, disaster diplomacy can easily be counted as ineffective, except that its potential has not yet been fully documented. The biggest potential for disaster diplomacy lies in the local or micro level cases. It is from the bottom up, rather than the top down that real transformation in societies can be achieved.

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