Disaster Diplomacy: Current Controversies and Future Prospects

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Globalization, population migration, climate change, and the explosion of low-intensity conflicts throughout the world have created an increasingly complex environment for humanitarian aid and international relations.1-3 Concurrently, the global community has witnessed unprecedented levels of philanthropy and humanitarian assistance in response to large-scale disasters.4,5 Disasters due to natural hazards in Aceh, Pakistan, and Yogyarta have highlighted the role of humanitarian assistance in serving devastated populations, while conflicts in Darfur and Gaza have attracted significant concern for the world's most vulnerable populations caught in political disarray. These intersecting trends have exhibited the potential role of humanitarian assistance in improving international relations and have served as the backdrop for the emergence of the controversial role of disaster diplomacy.

Advocates of disaster diplomacy highlight its role in facilitating cooperation and dialogue. Opponents, however, assert that disaster diplomacy violates the humanitarian principle of neutrality by politicizing disaster response. Complicating this debate are a number of ambiguities regarding the specifications of this maturing field. In particular, disaster diplomacy lacks a formal definition of principles, metrics of success, a strategy for integration into formal diplomatic efforts, and a dedicated training program for humanitarian agents planning to engage in this form of diplomacy. This begins to address these lingering issues, offering suggestions for the development of this interesting concept.

Disaster diplomacy is an evolving concept that broadly considers both the strategies for effective humanitarian action as well as the political consequences of those actions. However, the concept of disaster diplomacy has been cited inconsistently, illustrating an ambiguity that remains with regards to its operational definition. To most practitioners, disaster diplomacy is "concerned with the extent to which disaster-related activities—prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery—induce cooperation between enemy parties, nationally or internationally."6 More traditional diplomats counter by asserting that disaster diplomacy requires intervention that leads to cooperation between factional or warring parties through formalized diplomatic efforts, and a dedicated training program for humanitarian agents planning to engage in this form of diplomacy. This helps to address these lingering issues, offering suggestions for the development of this interesting concept.

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In this context, disaster diplomacy is framed within the conventional definition of diplomacy, which refers to the management of international relations through official interaction between governmental representatives.9 In truth, the dynamic nature of disaster diplomacy likely encompasses both perspectives. Nonetheless, these inconsistencies create important challenges and must be reconciled in order to craft an operational paradigm that allows for consistent application and further evolution of disaster diplomacy.

Humanitarian medical operations have been particularly useful in demonstrating the general framework of disaster diplomacy, while also introducing the unresolved questions that must be addressed as the concept matures. The US response to the tsunami that struck the Aceh Province of Indonesia in 2004 is a quintessential example that illustrates the existing ambiguities regarding the operational definition of disaster diplomacy. Following the humanitarian response in Aceh, some experts cited disaster diplomacy when local perceptions of the US improved as a result of the response.10 In support,
Minimum Standards, widely accepted in the humanitarian...
References