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# Deepening India-U.S. Cooperation on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific Regions

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*This paper summarizes the discussion and recommendations arising out of a workshop organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in Honolulu, Hawaii, on June 27, 2015. The workshop included officials from the governments of India and the United States, though the views are not considered “official policy” by either government. This paper presents both governments a possible path forward to strengthen cooperation on humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR).*

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) cohosted the first Indo-U.S. bilateral track 1.5 dialogue on humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) on June 27, 2015. The conference participants first benefited from a review of recent relevant actions, including India’s leadership of the international evacuation from Yemen, and India-U.S. efforts following the devastating earthquake in Nepal. India’s increased efforts in HA/DR have drawn widespread international notice and appreciation, especially in the United States. The focus of this dialogue was to engage with the lessons learned from these two events, and understand the way forward. Participants included Indian and U.S. government officials, and experts from civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and academia. (Annex 1 lists all participants.)

The panelists included Nisha Biswal, assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, U.S. Department of State (opening remarks); Vinay Kwatra, joint secretary (Americas), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (opening remarks); Rick Rossow, senior fellow and Wadhvani Chair, CSIS; C. Raja Mohan, head, strategic studies, Observer Research Foundation; Jim Schear, global fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center; Vikram Singh, vice president, Center for American Progress; Bill Berger, principal regional adviser, U.S. Agency for International Development; S. Ponnien Selvan, deputy inspector general, National Disaster Relief Force, Government of India; and Ashok Shukla, deputy secretary, Home Ministry, Government of India. Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., commander, U.S. Pacific Command, gave the keynote closing address.

Many of the panelists have had significant experience in dealing with HA/DR, with some having also played a role in the recent Yemen evacuation and in responding to the Nepal earthquake. The workshop had three sessions: Review of India's Role in Yemen Evacuation; Review of U.S. and India Roles in Nepal Earthquake Relief; and Looking Ahead—Future Cooperation on HA/DR in Asia Pacific. (Annex 2 provides the complete agenda.)

## Growing Demand for HA/DR

The Indian Ocean and the Pacific regions experience many natural disasters, which makes it important that major regional powers cooperate on HA/DR. For India and the United States, this is an important and frequent space where both countries intersect. The United States has had a long tradition and possesses unique capabilities in this area, while India enjoys proximity as well as close political and cultural connections throughout the region.

During the discussion, participants highlighted the challenges faced by governments, NGOs, the private sector, and civil society during such disasters. Experts gave their opinion as to where sharing and collaboration between India and the United States was feasible, and how pre-crisis planning could be improved.

Both the Indian and the U.S. governments have their own mechanisms in dealing with HA/DR. Over the years, India for its part has greatly advanced the projection of its capabilities—both civil and military—and increased its role as a provider of humanitarian assistance abroad. The presence of Indians abroad has increased, as has India's economic connections within the region. These deeper regional connections are creating a growing desire to contribute to regional safety and security.

India has put significant effort into building up its national capacity. It has the National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF), institutionalized in 2005, which has taken the lead role in that country's HA/DR. India has also started showing greater comfort in dealing with the United States on HA/DR in its own "sphere of engagement." A good starting point was in the 2005 New Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship, which included a specific reference to military cooperation on HA/DR. This policy was reiterated in the updated 2015 version of the framework.

Both countries can greatly benefit from complementarity in their HA/DR resources and each country should endeavor to plug the other's gaps when necessary. Moreover, both countries should be prepared to support whichever third country is best placed and willing to lead an international disaster response. It is important to overcome the residual suspicion in some quarters in India that U.S. interventions in the region are against Indian interests.

## Policy Challenges

Conference participants recommended policy challenges such as coordination on sovereign clearances, ground-level distribution of aid, sharing of information, dealing with the NGOs and local needs, and meteorological mapping of hazards.

A common occurrence during disasters is that relief items are quick to arrive but the distribution by the material-handling teams is slowed by the disaster that has taken place. When operating in third countries, the tarmac at airports may get choked up, and sometimes clearance and coordination may prove difficult. Participants suggested that building capabilities in the areas of communication, coordination, and discussion has to be strengthened in order to address these difficulties. This is where the Indo-U.S. cooperation is very important. Such communication will also be able to address issues such as required government clearances and issuance of visas, which ordinarily may seem simple, yet can be quite complicated and time consuming.

Further, because disasters have a transborder dimension, having and sharing information to assess what kind of supplies can be provided in the affected areas affected would be beneficial. This sharing is important to avoid miscalculations (for example, in the 2013 Pakistan earthquake, non-winterized tents were sent to Pakistan as the winters were setting in).

With regard to aid distribution, some participants raised the issue that keeping in mind the interests and sensitivities (political, economic, religious) of the host/impacted nation is critical. Therefore, though other nations may be providing assistance at a large scale, it is the receiving country that should be allowed to distribute and utilize the aid the way it feels appropriate. Understanding these sensitivities beforehand is also crucial, as it can prevent confusion at the impact site (for example, during the Bhuj earthquake in 2001, beef meals were provided, even though beef is not generally consumed in India for religious reasons). Further, humanitarians must “do no harm,” in the sense of introducing economic or social change that is unsustainable, and which upon removal by departing aid agencies after a major disaster response can cause unintended repercussions to the locality.

Another huge challenge is that other than India and China, many of the donors have less money to bring to the table than international NGOs. The International Medical Corps had US\$12 million that they had raised on Facebook. U.S. international NGOs raised over US\$120 million that they brought to the response, and the EU, approximately US\$173 million. Thus, thinking about how the private sector and international community responds to such disasters is a challenge. These international NGOs are under the constraint of having to effectively spend this money and monitor its use. Yet, they also have to work under the government. The challenge is how to ensure coordination, such that maximum benefits can be gained from these funds.

The other issue that needs to be considered while dealing with natural disasters is the climatic conditions. In this regard preplanning in order to understand what is yet to come is also important. (For example, the winters were fast approaching after the 2013 Pakistan earthquake.

In the case of Nepal, the monsoons are now fast approaching.) These are open wounds that can cause further damage through landslides and flooding. Participants also discussed the need to build a more enhanced meteorological capacity. Despite great efforts in mapping hazards, not all hazards are well mapped. Although the South Asia region does have the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meteorological center, more efforts can be made such as having joint advocacy for all hazard mapping.

## Information Sharing

The Indo-U.S. HA/DR cooperation during the 2004 tsunami was lauded for its operational coordination. Good communication between Admiral Arun Prakash, India's chief of naval staff, and Admiral Walter Doran, U.S. Pacific Fleet commander, ensured that both countries were working on delivering relief at the same time and deconflicting efforts. Similarly during this conference, several participants noted that the successful collaboration between India and the United States in Nepal was largely due to the strong personal connections between key government functionaries in Delhi and Washington. This underscores the need to have more frequent, formal discussions of HA/DR issues between the two governments.

Internal coordination and the sharing of best practices have previously taken place successfully between the United States and India. The United States in 1973 adopted the Incident Command System to coordinate overall efforts during a disaster. Such coordinated effort was provided in India after the 2001 Gujarat earthquake. India has since adapted the model to form its own Indian Response System. Panelists suggested that reviewing this would be beneficial for future bilateral cooperation.

When disasters strike, having an inventory of the open spaces in town is beneficial, which aids in organizing water points and distributing aid effectively. Implementation of building codes and standards is essential. Having a plan to remove rubble is also beneficial; for this, sharing new and advanced technologies would be important. Participants suggested that it would be beneficial for the United States to conduct a "technology workshop" highlighting new technologies related to HA/DR (such as finding trapped people and emergency medical technology).

Further, in complicated responses such as Yemen, another beneficial step would be to work out in advance the response of frequent partners. Having prior understanding of whom to connect with and how when a crisis strikes is important in order to get things underway.

Sharing of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and sharing of knowledge on how various responses work would help create an interface at a point of crisis. Creating an environment such that teams on the ground in the affected countries and capitals have good communication and collaboration is important to have maximum impact and coordination. The participants emphasized the critical importance of developing these SOPs.

The participants also discussed the importance of social media in facilitating HA/DR operations. During the Nepal earthquake, India put a lot of information out on social media, which helped with information flow. Exchange of experiences by the two sides will be valuable.

## The Way Forward

Stage	Suggested Actions
<b>Compare Capabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• India and the United States should hold an annual discussion to share the evolution of processes, capabilities, technologies, and threat assessments where both nations may play a role.</li> <li>• Such a discussion should include the relevant foreign ministries, aid agencies, militaries, and NGOs.</li> <li>• In addition, India and the United States should begin to include private companies with their own HA/DR capabilities such as Internet companies, logistics companies, airlines, and more. Public-private partnerships can augment a state's capacity to assist in a crisis.</li> <li>• This discussion also included an open and frank assessment of the countries where each would be expected to take a lead role due to either proximity, placement of supplies and personnel, or political ties.</li> <li>• The discussion should focus less on developing a rigid playbook, but instead focus on going through scenarios where likely sources of friction can be identified. Variables and small bureaucratic issues can be worked into the exercise, which will enable the identification of common sources of friction, and thus enable preplanning a response.</li> <li>• Every year the exercise can be reenacted, changing the scenario and making it more complex.</li> </ul>
<b>Review Disaster-Mitigation Efforts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both India and the United States work with other regional partners on disaster mitigation. The two countries should proactively share the progress of such efforts and look for ways to cooperate, including public-private partnerships such as the Rockefeller “Resilient Cities” effort.</li> <li>• Mitigation discussions should include a robust review of existing and planned engineering/technology developments in this area.</li> </ul>
<b>Conduct Bilateral Exercises— Tabletop and Field</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• India and the United States should agree upon the most likely and highest-impact events where both countries will be involved, and conduct regular exercises focused on these events.</li> <li>• Both countries should look at the logistics that will go into likely scenarios and plan possible coordination ahead of time, such as common staging nations near affected nations.</li> <li>• India and the United States should share assessments of third countries' capabilities to respond to crises.</li> <li>• Where such assessments have not been conducted, India and the United States should consider preparing common assessment standards so that assessments are “apples to apples.”</li> </ul>
<b>Conduct Exercises with Nations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When possible, India and the United States should conduct exercises in countries likely to be affected by major events where they both will play a role.</li> <li>• Such exercises should be planned in a way that specifically strengthens the host nations.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Accelerated Technology Sharing</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When either side has developed new technologies that can facilitate assistance during HA/DR interventions, the two governments should accelerate sharing the technologies, including if the technologies fall under any type of control regime.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reviewing Opportunities and Benefits for Common Platforms/ Depots</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As India and the United States look to induct new technologies and platforms into their respective HA/DR capabilities, such planning should be shared in case there is some benefit to developing common platforms.</li> <li>India and the United States should share the current status and future plans for a “persistent presence”—pre-positioning supplies, skills, and equipment used in HA/DR in depots close to likely events.</li> <li>India and the United States should discuss ways to facilitate the shared use of such supplies and equipment ahead of a crisis to expedite the use and deployment.</li> <li>Such cooperation can also include looking at ways that increased data sharing (such as oceanic data) can help both countries develop better early-warning systems for potential disasters.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Post-HA/DR Intervention Review</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>India and the United States should plan debriefing exercises following an HA/DR intervention involving both countries. This should include both on-the-ground practitioners as well as senior policy leaders to allow for a quick feedback loop on how the two sides could strengthen cooperation based on a real example.</li> <li>Part of the post-intervention review is looking at ways that the conveyance of assistance can cause other types of follow-on damages to the target, such as putting local manufacturers of supplies out of business by flooding the market with foreign versions of the same supplies.</li> <li>By documenting common threads in national and international responses, it is possible to avoid managing each disaster as an entirely new event.</li> </ul>

## Annex 1: List of Participants

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Brad GLOSSERMAN  
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Vinay KWATRA  
*Joint Secretary*  
*Indian Ministry of External Affairs*

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*U.S. Department of State*

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*Hawaii National Guard*

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National Security Council

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## Annex 2: Agenda

*U.S.-India Cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief  
Looking Back/Looking Ahead (Track 1.5)  
Hilton Hawaiian Village–Kahili Suite (Kalia Tower), Honolulu  
June 27, 2015*

- 1:00pm      Registration
- 1:20pm      Opening Remarks
- *Nisha Desai Biswal, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, U.S. Department of State*
  - *Vinay Kwatra, Joint Secretary (Americas), Ministry of External Affairs*
- 1:45pm      Review of India’s Role in Yemen Evacuation, 2014
- *Chair: Richard M. Rossow, Senior Fellow and Wadhvani Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies*
  - *S. PonnienSelvan, Deputy Inspector General, National Disaster Relief Force, Government of India*
- 2:05pm      Review of U.S. and India Roles in Nepal Earthquake Relief
- *Chair: C. Raja Mohan, Head, Strategic Studies, Observer Research Foundation*
  - *Bill Berger, U.S. Agency for International Development*
  - *Ashok Shukla, Deputy Secretary, Home Ministry, Government of India*
- 2:50pm      Looking Ahead—Future Cooperation on HA/DR in Asia Pacific
- *Richard M. Rossow, Raja Mohan Jointly Chair*
  - *Jim Schear, Global Fellow, The Woodrow Wilson Center*
  - *Vikram Singh, Vice President, Center for American Progress*
- 4:15pm      Summary of Look-Ahead Discussion
- *C. Raja Mohan, Head, Strategic Studies, Observer Research Foundation*

- *Richard M. Rossow, Senior Fellow and Wadhvani Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

4:35pm Closing Keynote Address by Admiral Harry B. Harris, Jr., U.S. Navy, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command (Followed by Q&A)

5:00pm HA/DR Event Concludes

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## About the Authors

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