

WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC?

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DECEMBER 2023

FONDATION
pour la RECHERCHE
STRATÉGIQUE



Observatoire
du Multilatéralisme
en Indo-Pacifique



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Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations are of increasing importance in international relations and one of the fastest growing areas of military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. While HADR is, and should remain, a predominantly civilian activity, armed forces are used to complement existing relief mechanisms by providing specific support mainly due to their logistical capabilities. As a result, HADR operations are playing an ever more significant role in the activities of the armed forces and in discussions in regional security institutions. This phenomenon is likely to increase in the years to come due to the foreseeable rise in the number of natural disasters, linked in part to climate change,¹ but also to the growth of the world's population.

Against a backdrop of increasingly polarised international relations, this change in HADR actors can transform an initially cooperative activity into a potential zero-sum game between aid-providing countries in which the speed of intervention is a factor not only of humanitarian effectiveness but also of influence. HADR operations demonstrate the level of commitment of the intervening country in a region, facilitate access to the recipient country, demonstrate the operator's capabilities and know-how, and offer opportunities for coalition-building and engagement with new partners.² They also offer a means of increasing military interoperability between partners in a context perceived as less "threatening" by neighbouring countries.³ In this respect, it is no exaggeration to say that HADR operations blur the lines between "soft" and "hard" power activities.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to examine the possible future of the military component of HADR operations. It takes note of the growing strategic dimension of HADR activities, the qualitative changes in which are, in addition to climate change, the result of growing political polarisation in the Indo-Pacific. With this in mind, it analyses the existing collective structures for HADR and considers whether they meet needs, as well as their current and potential political impact.

In doing so, it notes that the collective effort in the area of HADR is based on a limited number of Western and non-Western nations. This is likely to further increase the dilemma

¹ According to the Brussels-based Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), the number of catastrophic events (excluding the covid-19 pandemic) would have risen to 432 by 2022, compared with an annual average of 357 during the period 2001-2020. Quoted in Upadhyaya Shishir, "Naval humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations in the Indo-Pacific region: need for fresh thinking", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 2023, vol.18, n°3, pp. 282-294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2198887>

² Capie David, "The US and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in East Asia: Connective Coercive and Non-Coercive uses of military Power", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2015, vol. 38, n°3, pp. 309-331, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.1002914>

³ Leahy Peter, "Good Deeds and Good Strategy: Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Operations", *The Strategist*, 8 April 2013.

⁴ Soft power is a concept developed by Joseph Nye at the end of the Cold War. It refers to a state's ability to seduce and attract. Soft power results not so much from the implementation of a policy as from the attractive effects of a specific political, economic or cultural model. Although it targets public opinion, it is more akin to a form of seduction than to a political approach structured around defined objectives.

for all nations when allocating resources to warfare activities on the one hand and humanitarian assistance on the other. Furthermore, although several Indo-Pacific states have made efforts to strengthen their capabilities and improve civil-military coordination mechanisms, a notable resource imbalance persists among these states. This leaves a need to coordinate and streamline the efforts among them to ensure a more equitable distribution of capabilities and prevent duplication of effort in times of crisis.

I. **HADR operations and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific**

A) *HADR as a combination of soft and hard power*

In today's specialist literature, HADR's activities are mainly viewed through the prism of increased needs linked to the consequences of climate change. Climate change is seen as a risk multiplier and consequently, a factor in the depletion of resources. And in this respect, creates an additional burden for the armed forces. But while HADR is an increasingly important component of their activity, it is not their primary purpose.

The growing importance of climate change as a security issue, because of its ability to change the operational environment in which armed forces operate, has only increased the strategic nature of HADR and the attention it receives. But the new interest in HADR is also based on changing perceptions of the nature of threats, and a different understanding of the global security environment. The perception of a threat linked to power rivalries has not disappeared, but it is now also linked to non-traditional security concerns, in which natural disasters figure prominently. At a time when the legitimacy of war as a state policy has diminished considerably, it naturally makes the ability to respond to natural disasters an instrument (among others) for asserting power.⁵ There is also a real risk of a military conflict and a humanitarian crisis occurring simultaneously, for example as a result of climate change.⁶

The growing needs and HADR capabilities of the majority of Indo-Pacific coastal states, combined with the increasing polarisation of international relations, makes HADR an instrument of strategic competition, leading governments to accept the presence of foreign military assets, and consequently the influence of extra-regional powers.

The nature of this influence varies according to the assisted country and the underlying motivations of the assisting country. For example, while the provision of assistance to allies and partners is partly a moral duty and partly a matter of maintaining security cooperation, the deployment of HADR operations can also be part of a desire to be "more geopolitically competitive".⁷

Some authors go so far as to claim that HADR is a form of soft power competition applied to national security. Humanitarian disasters reveal the vulnerabilities and lack of resources of states in disaster management, and HADR competence is an indicator of the operational

⁵ It has been recommended, for example, that HADR should be used by the member states of the ANZUS treaty (a security pact signed in 1951 between Australia, New Zealand and the US) to establish "formal and informal links that are not part of a formal alliance but which help to prevent perceptions of encirclement by China", Newby Vanessa, "ANZUS Cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response in the Asia-Pacific: Ships in the Night?", *Australian Outlook*, 5 February 2020.

⁶ The harassment of Japanese ships by the Chinese air force during the 2011 tsunami relief operations lends credence to this possibility.

⁷ Canyon Deon K, Ryan Benjalin L., "Military and Private Sector HADR - Now a Sophisticated Tool for Strategic Competition", *Security Nexus*, August 2021, [Military and Private Sector HADR - Now a Sophisticated Tool for Strategic Competition - Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies \(dkiapcss.edu\)](https://www.dkiapcss.edu/)

readiness of conventional forces, whereas HADR military deployment is a matter of hard power, even if it is presented as soft power.⁸ In fact, while the mobilisation of military capabilities for HADR-related tasks is presented in this context as a benign tool providing exceptional assistance to vulnerable populations, it nonetheless has a potentially coercive dimension, the use of which will be influenced by the provider nation's geopolitical interests.

In this context, the attitude of the armed forces towards HADR operations is ambivalent. While they monopolise resources intended for combat, they are also part of global strategic competition. The development of a country's HADR capabilities provides important information about the real progress made by its armed forces in acquiring skills, particularly in force projection.⁹ The cooperations developed to conduct HADR operations essentially reproduce the configuration of power relations in the international system.

B) HADR and the Sino-American competition

In the Indo-Pacific, the duality of HADR operations refers more specifically to the rivalry between the United States and its allies on the one hand, and China on the other, and to a lesser extent the rivalry between China and India. The US and China have intervened on numerous occasions in HADR operations.

The US is the main supplier of HADR in the Indo-Pacific. With more than 2,000 aircraft, 200 ships, 100 submarines, and more than 370,000 armed forces personnel (including Department of Defense civilian personnel), US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) can mobilise significant resources to respond to disasters.¹⁰ Between 1991 and 2019, US armed forces have responded to 36 natural disasters in some 15 countries in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ Twelve of these missions were in response to earthquakes and tsunamis, 11 to tropical cyclones, and three to major floods¹². Eight of these missions took place in the Philippines, the largest recipient of US HADR. In fact, the US is able to mobilise resources for each of its interventions that are incomparable to those of its partners.¹³ However, American military aid has mainly been directed towards the Indian Ocean, and more rarely towards the Pacific Ocean, where Australia, New Zealand and France are more present.

China has increased its own contribution, now enjoying the economic and military means to match its ambitions. As early as 2004, Hu Jintao, then general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, “argued that China's role in international HADR efforts was part of a

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Enstrom Jeffrey, “Taking Disaster Seriously: East Asian Military Involvement in International Disaster Relief Operations and the Implications for Force Projections”, *Asian Security*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2013, pp. 38-61.

¹⁰ Gassert Francis, Burke Sharon, Zimmerman Rachel, “UPTEMPO: The US and Natural Disasters in the Pacific”, *New America*, March 2020, [UPTEMPO The United States and Nat58.ural Disasters in the Pacific 2020-03-31_ZvF7F4K.pdf\(d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net\)](https://www.newamerica.org/asia/2020/03/31/ZvF7F4K.pdf(d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net))

¹¹ Zimmer Chris, “Perspectives on Chinese and American HADR in the Indo-Pacific Region”, The University of Texas at Austin, 8 March 2020, [Perspectives on Chinese and American HADR in the Indo-Pacific Region \(utexas.edu\)](https://www.utexas.edu/perspectives-on-chinese-and-american-hadr-in-the-indo-pacific-region)

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ During the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the US mobilised no fewer than 9 ships (civilian and military), 25 helicopters, one C-17 transport aircraft and 1,200 personnel, more than the total resources available to Australia, for all its operations. *Ibid.* Moreover, military intervention accounts for only 10 per cent of US disaster response. The vast majority of American aid takes the form of non-military assistance, provided by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, by Congress or by private groups.

broader historical mission in which China would increase its global role”¹⁴. China has in fact intervened in 16 disasters in 13 Asian countries between 2002 and 2019.¹⁵

The majority of Chinese HADR operations between 2002 and 2019 took place in the northern Indian Ocean, mainly in countries where China is in direct rivalry with the US (Pakistan) and India (Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal),¹⁶ and where it is relatively easy for China to mobilise its HADR capabilities. On the other hand, it has had little or no military involvement in the west and south-west of the Indian Ocean. But this in no way means that this situation is fixed. China's growing presence of the Indian Ocean is a reality. To date, the Indian Ocean remains a secondary theatre. China's permanent naval presence is still limited, but it does have a base in Djibouti, while it continues to develop its influence with the coastal states of the Indian Ocean, including the island states. China is therefore likely to continue to strengthen its HADR capabilities throughout the region. The possible increase in disasters in the region could allow for this, thereby reinforcing regional polarisation. China has also strengthened its civil response capabilities, with the deployment of international search and rescue teams (CISAR) and hospital ships specially designed for international emergencies.

Geographical proximity and logistical capacity are clearly major factors in the effectiveness of HADR operations. However, they are not the only determining factors. The degree of political penetration by HADR actors is also a logistical component, as operations can only be implemented with the agreement of the recipient countries. The possession of overseas military bases is also a facilitator of HADR operations. Taken together, these characteristics determine the geography of HADR operations, which is more a reflection of political power struggles than the geography of humanitarian disasters alone and cannot be reduced to the simple distinction between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. While the US projects itself far from its shores, China's interventions take place mainly on its immediate periphery.¹⁷ This situation underlines China's capacity for projection and intervention, which is still inferior to that of the US. However, it is questionable whether the US will be able to maintain its superiority in the long term.¹⁸ The current competition in the South China Sea illustrates this point.

Finally, there are only three cases where the US and China have intervened militarily at the same time to respond to a disaster in the Indo-Pacific: in Pakistan in 2005, in Nepal in 2015, and in Tonga in 2022. These experiences have not facilitated the development of cooperative practices between the two rivals. In Nepal, for example, China reacted swiftly by making significant resources available to help with relief operations. However, China has also been accused by the other two intervening countries, the US and India, of failing to coordinate and

¹⁴ *Ibid.* It should be noted, however, that while the US armed forces have been involved in managing responses to natural disasters since the 19th century, HADR emerged as a central concern in the US at around the same time as in China. The 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* was the first official document to emphasise the usefulness of non-combat assistance activities because of the need to promote stability and development in the 'long war' against terrorism. In 2007, the US maritime strategy – *A Cooperative Strategy for the 21st Century Seapower* – made HADR one of the core missions of the Marines and Coast Guards. Capie David *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Zimmer Chris, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Zimmer Chris, *op. cit.* Thailand and Burma follow an identical logic, but must be seen in the context of ASEAN.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ The Chinese navy is now the world's leading navy in terms of the number of ships. In 2021, it had more than 355 ships. This number is expected to rise to 460 by 2030. Shelbourne Mallory, "China Has World's Largest Navy With 355 Ships and Counting" Says Pentagon", *USNI News*, November 3, 2021, [China Has World's Largest Navy With 355 Ships and Counting, Says Pentagon - USNI News](#)

of treating its intervention zone as “sovereign territory”, by refusing to grant access to foreign military interveners.¹⁹

C) HADR and power rivalries in a context of lack of resources

HADR supply is struggling to keep pace with the accelerating growth in demand. This situation is mainly due to the lack of capacity – particularly in the field of maritime transport – in the vast majority of Indo-Pacific countries, which means that the bulk of the effort falls on a limited number of countries. In this context, HADR operations have become a strategic issue and an instrument of influence, enabling the players concerned to project themselves as credible and committed regional powers. This potential battle for influence is sometimes waged between strategic allies and rivals, depending on the circumstances and configuration of a given disaster. In addition to China and the US, the main aid providers in the Indo-Pacific are India, Australia, Japan, and France. Other countries do, of course, have some HADR capabilities and appear as such in the specialist literature. The Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam all fall into this category.²⁰ However, their capabilities and willingness to intervene remain limited to their national borders.

India

India, whose credibility as a provider of humanitarian assistance, crisis relief, and regional security has grown considerably over the last two decades, is emerging as one of the main leading HADR powers in the Indian Ocean. During the 2004 tsunami, it deployed some 32 ships, seven aircraft and 20 helicopters to provide assistance in the coastal Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and the Andaman and Nicobar islands, as well as in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. In addition to its own nationals, it also evacuated Nepalese, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and American civilians from Beirut in 2006, before intervening again in Libya in 2011,²¹ the Maldives in 2014, and Sri Lanka in 2016. Most of its interventions are in south Asia and the northern Indian Ocean region. Finally, India has endeavoured, albeit with mixed success, to establish cooperative mechanisms and standard procedures for relief operations within regional organisations.²² India's HADR policy is now anchored in its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) strategy, which aims in particular to strengthen India's presence in its immediate neighbourhood and in the Indian Ocean, and to limit the growth of China's presence in the region. The use of HADR as a tool of influence was illustrated during the 2015 earthquake in Nepal (see above), when India was the first power to provide aid to its neighbour, which the Indian authorities tried to take some credit for. However, they were accused of not coordinating sufficiently with Nepalese agencies.²³

Australia

Australia has also demonstrated its ability to respond quickly and flexibly to disasters and humanitarian crises in recent history, both in Australia and in the Indo-Pacific. This is

¹⁹ Watters Robin, Triplett Alexander, “China and the Future of HADR operations in great power competition”, 18 October 2021.

²⁰ See for example Idris Aida, “Determinants of HADR mission success: exploring the experience of the Malaysian army”, *Emerald Insight*, 2014, [Determinants of HADR mission success: exploring the experience of the Malaysian army | Emerald Insight](#)

²¹ Singh Parmar Sarabjeet, “Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in India's National Strategy”, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vo. 6, No 1, January 2012, [jds_6_1_SarabjeetParmar.pdf \(idsa.in\)](#)

²² Chakradeo, Saneet, “Neighborhood first responder: India's humanitarian assistance and disaster relief”, Policy Brief, August 2020, ORF

²³ *Ibid.*

illustrated by its response to Cyclone Tracy in 1974 in Darwin, the 2004 tsunami, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015, the Australian fires of 2019-2020, during the covid-19 crisis, and in 2021 during Cyclone Seroja in Indonesia and West Timor.²⁴ While the majority of Australia's extra-regional interventions take place in south-east Asia, Canberra also intervened during the tsunami and nuclear accident in Japan in 2011.²⁵

Japan

The Japanese self-defence forces (JSDF) are among the most experienced in the world in disaster relief operations. As Japan is located on the typhoon route and in an earthquake-prone area, they are also particularly well prepared for environmental disasters, whether or not linked to climate change.²⁶ In addition to their domestic activities, the JSDF have intervened on several occasions in the Indo-Pacific, notably in Indonesia (Aceh) during the 2004 tsunami and earthquake, and in 2013 in the Philippines, when the latter was hit by typhoon Haiyan.²⁷ Since 2012, Japan has also made a significant contribution, alone or in partnership with the US, Australia, and the United Kingdom, to capacity-building efforts in a number of Indo-Pacific countries (Mongolia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste).²⁸ Japan also established its first overseas base in 2011 to officially step up its training efforts in east African countries, with a particular focus on HADR's activities.²⁹

New Zealand

New Zealand is also a HADR player in the Indo-Pacific. It is a signatory to the ANZUS treaty, within which it cooperates mainly with Australia, and is a party to the FRANZ agreements, a coordinating mechanism between France, Australia, and New Zealand. Although it has fewer resources than the forementioned countries, it does have an amphibious ship, transport vehicles and helicopters, as well as a C-130 and P3 Orion transport aircraft, which were deployed during Cyclone Winston in 2016.³⁰

France

Although France has forces pre-positioned in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, these forces are in no way comparable to those of the major coastal states such as Japan, Australia, and India. The perspective changes when all of France's capabilities are taken into account, but the time it takes to deploy a PHA-type ship to the area, which is particularly well-suited to HADR, means that French operations take longer to implement, reducing their impact.³¹ In the Pacific, France is involved in the FRANZ mechanism alongside New Zealand and

²⁴ Westendorf Teagan, *Snapshots in a turbulent times: Australian HADR capabilities, challenges and opportunities*, ASPI, Special Report, October 2021, [Snapshot in a turbulent time: Australian HADR capabilities, challenges and opportunities \(amazonaws.com\)](https://www.amazonaws.com)

²⁵ DFAT/Australian Government, *The reconstruction initiative: Australia-Japan response to Japan's 2011 earthquake and tsunami*, November 2015, [The Reconstruction Initiative: Australia-Japan Foundation's response to Japan's 2011 earthquake and tsunami \(dfat.gov.au\)](https://www.dfat.gov.au)

²⁶ Keishi Ono, "Japan's Climate Security Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", IDSS Paper, No 12, 2021, November 2021.

²⁷ Konishi Weston S., "Is disaster relief revolutionising Japan's security affairs?", *East Asia Forum*, 6 July 2016,

²⁸ Keishi Ono, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Gassert Francis, Burke Sharon, Zimmerman Rachel, *op. cit.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ A BPC can be mobilised in 5 days, but it takes 21 days to travel from Toulon to Nouméa, for example.

Australia. French forces from New Caledonia were the first to intervene in Vanuatu in March 2023.

For all these countries, geopolitical rivalry has turned disaster response into a tool of security competition, which is nothing new in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, competition between China and the region's traditional donors, notably Australia and New Zealand, resulted in a rush of aid to Tonga after the twin disasters of a volcano eruption and tsunami in 2022. However, the increase – both observed and anticipated – in natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific means that the armed forces are facing the possibility of capability tensions, the scale of which is difficult, if not impossible, to assess because they will depend not just on the scale of each disaster but also on whether they occur simultaneously. This reality implies that no nation has or will have in the near future the capacity to intervene on its own if major disasters occur simultaneously in all the sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific. Developing and strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms is therefore a priority.

II. Regional cooperation in the field of HADR: mapping the existing situation in the Indo-Pacific

The effectiveness of HADR operations largely depends on the existing security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. This security architecture is supposed to enable complementarity and interoperability between the players present in a given region, and therefore to compensate for the capability weaknesses of the players concerned. The cooperative nature of HADR operations also presupposes sufficient political trust between the partner countries, without which effective coordination of their efforts would not be possible. However, the degree to which security architectures are structured varies from region to region and sub-region to sub-region. In fact, while HADR is a real concern for a number of organisations and forums in the Indo-Pacific, the mechanisms for putting it into practice remain few and far between in the various sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific.

A) HADR in the global Indo-Pacific

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), made up of Australia, India, Japan, and the US, grew out of efforts to coordinate humanitarian support operations following the 2004 tsunami, and could provide an ideal framework for the development of HADR operations in the Indo-Pacific. Its members are all major players in HADR operations in the region. The growing interoperability between the four Quad members is also a guarantee of relative effectiveness. Already strong between the US, Australia, and Japan, it has been strengthened with India through the participation of Japan and Australia in the Malabar exercises, initiated in 1992 on a strictly bilateral basis between India and the US.

Although the Quad's commitment to HADR operations has varied over time – for example, it appears in the joint communiqué published in March 2021,³² but is absent from the communiqué published in September of the same year³³ – the leaders of the four member countries agreed in March 2022 to create a new mechanism to respond to future

³² “Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: The Spirit of the Quad”, Press Statement, 12 March 2021, [SpiritofttheQuad_english.pdf \(indembassy-tokyo.gov.in\)](#)

³³ The White House, “Joint Statement from Quad Leaders”, Press Statement, 24 September 2021, [Joint Statement from Quad Leaders | The White House](#)

humanitarian challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The "Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific" was created in May 2022.³⁴

In September 2022, the foreign ministers of the member states also signed the "Guidelines for Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific". The document provides a framework for their partnership and also provides for the organisation of two meetings and an annual exercise, as well as coordination with the United Nations and its agencies.³⁵ The first Quad meeting on HADR issues and a first tabletop military exercise were held in New Delhi in December 2022.³⁶ However, no meeting or exercise was held in 2023.

The geographical location of the Quad members, and above all the US military presence throughout the region, ensures logistical continuity between all the Quad components. However, questions remain as to the group's ability to lead and coordinate collective responses,³⁷ especially in a context where each member state of the partnership has a variety of priority regional interests.

B) Pacific organisations

The **Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)** is the premier regional political and economic organisation and guarantor of the region's security. In 2018, through the adoption of the Boe Declaration, Forum Leaders affirmed a revitalised approach to regional security, broadened to include emerging and contemporary security issues such as climate, health, and safety. To respond as effectively as possible to the challenges facing island states, over the last ten years the Forum has set up sub-forums to support concrete projects. Set up in 2013, the Pacific Islands Development Forum and the Small Island States Group enable island states to voice their concerns and needs in terms of the blue economy and HADR.

The **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM)** is a dedicated defence forum within the region's security architecture, complementing the PIF on many issues, including HADR. Its members include the Defence Ministers of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, New Zealand, France, Chile, and Australia. In today's strategic environment, the SPDMM has become an important part of the regional security architecture, promoting the sharing of experience, and developing collective solutions to existing and emerging threats in the region. The emphasis is on maintaining interoperability and strengthening capabilities. At the SPDMM held in virtual format in 2020, the partners agreed to develop a specific regional HADR framework to complement the work of the PIF. As part of this, the partners set up an annual exercise dedicated to HADR operations called "Longreach", the second edition of which was held in Papua New Guinea in October 2023. For this exercise, the Papua New Guinea defence force organised the exercise jointly with the Australian defence force in Port Moresby, at the Murray Barracks Leadership Centre. Participants from Tonga, Fiji, New Zealand, France, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the US attended the exercise.

³⁴ US Department of State, "Joint Readout of Quad Ministerial Meeting", Press Statement, 23 September 2022, [Joint Readout of Quad Ministerial Meeting - US Department of State](#)

³⁵ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Fact Sheet: Guidelines for Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific*, [Fact Sheet: Guidelines for Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief \(HADR\) in the Indo-Pacific | Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade \(dfat.gov.au\)](#)

³⁶ ANI, "First Quad Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief meeting in Delhi", 14 December 2022.

³⁷ Chen Christopher, "The Quad and HADR Operations: Prospects for Cooperation with Southeast Asia", RSIS Commentary, no. 119, 21 November 2022.

The Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), which held its first meeting in 1988, is a forum for the chiefs of navies of the Pacific nations.³⁸ The WPNS is not an organisation specifically dedicated to HADR, but it does conduct exercises in the field. However, the recurring theme of interoperability, which emerged early on in its work due to the disparity of equipment and procedures between member states,³⁹ and the fact that the organisation is focused on its democratic members,⁴⁰ make it a useful instrument for implementing HADR in the region. The WPNS contributes to the synergy of regional HADR efforts and provides a platform for regional navies to learn from each other.

The FRANZ Agreement is a tripartite cooperation agreement signed in 1992 between France, Australia, and New Zealand. Under this agreement, the three nations intervene in the Pacific at the request of partner countries.⁴¹ These partners are the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.⁴²

In the event of a disaster, the three countries divide up responsibilities, share information and pool resources where necessary through coordination between ministries and embassies and with the authorities of the country or countries concerned. In addition to trilateral coordination in the event of a major disaster, the agreement more specifically provides for exchanges of information (particularly in the meteorological field to warn of the formation of cyclones), as well as the pooling of civil and military resources, both human and material. Joint exercises are also organised on a regular basis in the region, and an annual meeting is held to monitor cooperation.⁴³

It should also be noted that the armed forces have a support role under the agreement. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is responsible for monitoring and implementing the agreement, while France maintains a monitoring structure in French Polynesia and New Caledonia, under the authority of the high commissioners. For New Zealand, responsibility lies with the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID).

In the Pacific, annual official meetings and joint military exercises such as Southern Cross are the channels through which mutual understanding and interoperability are maintained between France, New Zealand, and Australia, as well as with their partners.⁴⁴ In particular,

³⁸ The WPNS brings together Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, France, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, China, the Philippines, South Korea, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga, the US and Vietnam. Bangladesh, India, Mexico, Peru and the United Kingdom have observer status.

³⁹ "The Western Pacific Naval Symposium", *Semaphore*, n°14, July 2006, [Microsoft Word - Semaphore 14 2006 - WPNS.doc \(navy.gov.au\)](#)

⁴⁰ Joseph Egidio, "Western Pacific Naval Symposium 2022 Concludes", *Foreign Brief*, 10 November 2022, [Western Pacific Naval Symposium 2022 Concludes | Foreign Brief](#)

⁴¹ *The FRANZ Arrangement*, Canberra, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 20 October 2014, [Franz-Arrangement-Brochure.pdf \(mfat.govt.nz\)](#)

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Alex Bastien, Baillat Alice, Gemenne François, *Rapport d'Etude No 7: Synthèse de la contribution française au rapport SPDMM*, Observatoire Defense et Climat, Direction Générale des Relations Internationales et de la Stratégie (DGRIS), Ministère des Armées, December 2018, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁴ However, FRANZ is not immune to turbulence between signatory states. In January 2022, for example, Australia reacted immediately but alone to provide assistance to Tonga following the volcanic explosion that the latter had suffered. France did not intervene until seven days later under the FRANZ banner. Although Australia's decision to intervene first was motivated by its fear of being preceded by China, the incident, which came almost a year after the controversy surrounding the cancellation of an AUKUS submarine construction contract, nonetheless generated a relative resurgence of resentment on the French side. See Gong Lina, Nanthini S., *op. cit.*

HADR was on the agenda for Exercise 2023, held from 24 April to 6 May 2023.⁴⁵ Organised every two years by the armed forces in New Caledonia (FANC), in 2023 it brought together 3,000 military personnel from 19 nations concerned by the consequences of climate-related issues in the region.⁴⁶

C) HADR in south-east Asia

ASEAN is clearly not an organisation dedicated solely to HADR operations, but has a regional disaster response system, the legal basis of which is the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), signed in 2005. This agreement is supported by operational institutions, notably the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM), whose three working groups include the National Disaster Management Offices (NDMOs) of the ten ASEAN member states. In addition to AADMER, ASEAN adopted a roadmap in 2021, the ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook 2021-2025. These policy and regulatory frameworks have paved the way for the establishment in Jakarta in 2022 of the AHA Centre (ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management). The AHA Centre is the operational hub for supporting states affected by natural (or man-made) disasters and facilitating real-time information sharing with international organisations and affected nations.⁴⁷

While ASEAN-led HADR operations have so far been more limited in nature than those conducted by some extra-regional actors, the organisation has nonetheless recently demonstrated its capabilities in the field by responding, for example, to the September 2018 tsunami in Indonesia.⁴⁸ However, the collective military response to disasters takes the form of multiple bilateral responses rather than a collective response under a single regional banner. During the 2018 tsunami, 18 countries, including ASEAN member states, coordinated bilaterally with the Indonesian armed forces, rather than through the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Centre (RHCC) established specifically in 2014 to coordinate the military component of HADR operations.⁴⁹ The RHCC covers a large part of the Indo-Pacific through a network of international liaison officers and links with regional army operations centres including Australia, Brunei, France, India, Laos, New Zealand, Philippines, Russia, Thailand, UK, and Vietnam.⁵⁰

Despite increasingly well-developed civilian crisis management mechanisms, it is the military that continues to be the main providers of aid within the countries of south-east Asia.⁵¹ The level of coordination between the militaries of the association's member countries remains low and a relative mistrust persists between member states. Discussions initiated in

⁴⁵ “French-Led Croix du Sud Exercise Highlights HADR, Combat Care”, Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 9 May 2023, [French-led Southern Cross exercise highlights HADR, combat care - Indo-Pacific Defense Forum \(ipdefenseforum.com\)](https://ipdefenseforum.com)

⁴⁶ The nations involved were Australia, Brunei, Canada, Fiji, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Singapore, Tonga, Vanuatu, the UK and the US. “Croix du Sud 2023”: Reacting in the event of a natural disaster in the Pacific, French Air Force, 27 April 2023, [“CROIX DU SUD 2023”: Reacting in the event of a natural disaster in the Pacific | Ministère des Armées \(defense.gouv.fr\)](https://defense.gouv.fr)

⁴⁷ Cook Alistair B., “Southeast Asia”, in Ear Jessica, Cook Alistair D.B., Canyon Dean V., *Disaster Response Regional Architectures: Assessing Future Possibilities*, Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, September 2017, PP. 17-20, [hadr-publication-web-version-1-1.pdf \(rsis.edu.sg\)](https://www.rsis.edu.sg)

⁴⁸ Gong Lina, Nanthini S., *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Cook Alistair D.B., “Southeast Asia” in Ear Jessica, Cook Alistair D.B., Canyon Deon V. (Eds.), *Op. Cit.*

⁵¹ Trias P., Cook A. D. B., “HADR in Southeast Asia: unpacking the military’s humanitarian role”, RSIS Commentaries, no. 184, 2020.

2015 led to the creation of an 'ASEAN Military Ready Group on HADR', but ASEAN is struggling to go beyond the role of facilitator of dialogue.⁵² In addition, both the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) have facilitated engagement at various levels on HADR issues between ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners,⁵³ including the initiation of an ADMM+ HADR Experts Group, tabletop exercises and bilateral dialogues on HADR and capacity-building. Generally speaking, however, ASEAN countries prefer to manage their HADR interactions individually and in conjunction with extra-regional players. The US remains the preferred partner for a number of ASEAN countries, particularly the Philippines and Thailand.⁵⁴

Finally, the **Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC)** is a multilateral format established in 2016 to promote cooperation between the states bordering the Lancang and Mekong rivers.⁵⁵ The LMC includes Burma, Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Because its primary aim is to promote the economic development of the Mekong sub-region, HADR operations are not the LMC's priority. Collective response mechanisms were nonetheless strengthened in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic, facilitated by the growing importance of China's bilateral aid programmes and the friendly military relations between certain LMC countries. However, Chinese policies boil down to the bilateral assistance offered by China to other LMC states in the event of a disaster.⁵⁶

D) Collective organisations and HADR in the Indian Ocean region

The Indian Ocean region illustrates better than any other the difficulties inherent in implementing effective HADR mechanisms. The lack of capacity in a substantial proportion of the states in the region, particularly those on the African coast, as well as the political fragmentation of the area and rivalries between states, are all obstacles. But the implementation of collective HADR mechanisms in the Indian Ocean suffers the most from weak governance, particularly at sea.

Cooperation on HADR did not really begin in south Asia until 2005, in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. At that time, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) developed the Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management (SCFDM). Each country in the region has since passed legislation and established a National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA).⁵⁷ Three regional centres were subsequently created to implement the SCFDM: the SAARC Disaster Management Center (SDMC) based in New Delhi; the SAARC Meteorological Center based in Dhaka (Bangladesh) and the SAARC Coastal Management Center (SCMC) located in Malé (Maldives).⁵⁸

However, none of the SAARC pledges have yet materialised. The SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND), signed in 2010 by all member states, has only been ratified by India. The Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM), which provided for the identification and nomination by each SAARC member country of

⁵² Gong Lina, "Collective HADR Responses in the Indo-Pacific: Additional Mechanisms in the Making?", *RSIS, IDSS Paper*, No. 30, March 2022.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Paolo Angelo, Cook Alistair, "Military humanitarian and disaster governance networks in Southeast Asia: framework and analysis", *Disasters*, vol. 47, no. 1, January 2023.

⁵⁵ The Lancang is the part of the Mekong that flows through China.

⁵⁶ Gong Lina, Nanthini S., *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Shanahan David, "South Asia", in Ear Jessica, Cook Alistair D.B. Canyon Dean V., *op. cit.* pp. 21-23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

equipment and capabilities that could be mobilised as part of a collective response, never saw the light of day, while the series of annual collective disaster response exercises did not go beyond the inaugural exercise.⁵⁹ In fact, assistance operations in south Asia are essentially bilateral.⁶⁰

The political tensions within SAARC, particularly between India and Pakistan, but also the capacity weaknesses of certain states, explain this situation.⁶¹ In addition, some SAARC members, such as Nepal, do not have the necessary resources to come to the aid of other states.

Created in 1997 on the initiative of Nelson Mandela, **the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)** is primarily an organisation designed to promote socio-economic cooperation between its member states and is not equipped to respond directly to disasters. Nevertheless, it published "Guidelines for HADR" in September 2021,⁶² and seems keen to increase cooperation in disaster response. HADR is also addressed in the IORA's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, published in December 2022.⁶³ However, its action in terms of HADR remains extremely limited. Initiatives are not structured within the organisation. They depend largely on the leadership of individual member states. India, for example, involves IORA member states in its own seminars and training exercises in this field, but organises few of them directly within the regional structure. For example, in August 2019, India invited delegates from IORA States and the ASEAN Secretariat to participate in an annual Indian HADR exercise in Chennai.

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) provides a platform for the exchange of best practice and organises regular seminars and conferences to this end. It also conducts HADR exercises to promote interoperability between navies.⁶⁴ Like the IORA (but long before it), the IONS published its own guidelines for HADR in December 2017.⁶⁵ In particular, it specifies that the commitment of national capabilities by member states can only be made on a voluntary basis and with respect to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national legislation of the affected state, and details the main mechanisms for action which define, among other things, the size and nature of the resources committed.

However, IONS' HADR action comes up against two major obstacles. Firstly, the lack of interoperability to enable navies of different sizes and natures to cooperate effectively. Interoperability can only be developed through joint interactions (exercises, courses), which rivalries between the navies of the member states prevent or limit. The second obstacle is the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Canyon Deon, "India Leading International HADR Cooperation in South Asia", *Security Nexus*, May 2021, [N2610-Canyon-India-HADR-1.pdf \(dkiapcss.edu\)](https://dkiapcss.edu/N2610-Canyon-India-HADR-1.pdf)

⁶¹ During the 2005 earthquake, for example, Pakistan was extremely reluctant to accept Indian government-to-government aid, and India did not provide assistance through NGOs. Singh Parmar Sarabjeet, "Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in India's National Strategy", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vo. 6, No 1, January 2012, [jds_6_1_SarabjeetParmar.pdf \(idsa.in\)](https://idsa.in/jds_6_1_SarabjeetParmar.pdf)

⁶² "21st IORA Council of Ministers Meeting on 17 November 2021 held by the People's Republic of Bangladesh", *IORA News*, 17 November 2021, [Official Press Release: 21st IORA Council of Ministers Meeting on 17 November 2021 held by the People's Republic of Bangladesh. - Indian Ocean Rim Association - IORA](https://www.iora.int/media/24442/indopacific-outlook.pdf). However, unlike the IONS Guidelines, the content of the Guidelines has not been made public.

⁶³ IORA, *IORA's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.iora.int/media/24442/indopacific-outlook.pdf>

⁶⁴ Shishir Upadhyaya, *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁵ *IONS Guidelines for HADR*, Version 3.1, December 2017, [IONS Guidelines on HADR Version.pdf](https://www.ions.org/ions-guidelines-on-hadr-version.pdf)

lack of a permanent coordination centre, which is only partially compensated for in the event of a disaster by the intervention of the IONS Secretariat.⁶⁶

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), an organisation set up in 1997 and comprising Bangladesh, India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, and Nepal, recognised the need for regional cooperation on HADR in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. However, it was only in 2016 that it called for joint exercises, the first of which was held in 2017 in India, which also hosted the second exercise in 2020.⁶⁷ The organisation struggles to really involve the armed forces of all its member states, partly due to a lack of resources on their part.

In the south-west Indian Ocean, the mechanisms implemented by the **Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)** as part of the regional maritime safety programme (MASE),⁶⁸ funded by the European Union, are all valuable tools for conducting HADR operations without being specifically dedicated to them. **The Regional Centre for the Fusion of Maritime Information (CRFIM)**, based in Madagascar, is a regional centre for the exchange and fusion of maritime information over an area stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to the Bab el Mandeb Strait.⁶⁹ It is complemented by a **Regional Coordination Centre for Operations at Sea (CRCO)**, based in the Seychelles, whose main function is to conduct joint operations at sea.⁷⁰ Neither of them are exclusively dedicated to HADR operations. However, both are essential and complementary instruments for maritime security in this sub-region of the Indian Ocean.

III. HADR between cooperation and strategic competition

A) *The challenges of multilateralism*

The number of regional organisations dealing with HADR to varying degrees should not lead us to believe that there is any substantial organisational structure of HADR in the Indo-Pacific region. On the contrary, several lessons can be drawn from the various examples cited above to strengthen regional cooperation on HADR.

Firstly, the internal nature of the respective mechanisms strongly influences their level of collective response to disasters. For example, ASEAN and FRANZ have clear mandates, established channels of communication, shared identities or values as a basis for cooperation and, above all, a good knowledge of the resources and working methods of other members. As a consequence, they have acquired significant experience in collective HADR knowledge sharing and operations. Other organisations such as the IORA and the LMC, which give priority to socio-economic cooperation, have not developed regional expertise in the field of HADR.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Canyon Deon, *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁸ The MASE programme is funded by the European Union to the tune of €37.5 million. Indian Ocean Commission, “The Regional Maritime Information Centre presented at the Madagascar International Fair”, 22 May 2016, [The Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre presented at the Madagascar International Fair - Indian Ocean Commission \(commissionoceanindien.org\)](https://www.commissionoceanindien.org/)

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* A similar centre could emerge at the end of the CRIMARIO II programme currently underway in the Bay of Bengal and make a useful contribution to BIMSTEC's activities.

⁷⁰ Jean-Tenahe Faatau, “The Indian Ocean has its Regional Coordination Centre for Operations at Sea”, *Outremers360*, 30 September 2019, [The Indian Ocean has its Regional Coordination Centre for Operations at Sea | Outremers360](https://www.outremers360.com/)

Moreover, the power dynamics between the countries involved in any of the mechanisms can influence the effectiveness of collective action. ASEAN has been able to leverage its internal power symmetry and perceived weakness vis-à-vis its more powerful dialogue partners to establish itself as a major platform for international cooperation in this area. In mechanisms with significant power asymmetries, their direction and development are strongly influenced by the interest and investment of the dominant actors. This is evident in IORA and IONS, which are largely dependent on Indian leadership.

Furthermore, in all sub-regions there is a latent tension between multilateral cooperation and the use of bilateral means. This tension is linked first and foremost to the very principles of humanitarian law, which is based on respect for state sovereignty and non-interference.⁷¹ Foreign aid is only accepted if it is requested by the government of the affected country, which generally leads to bilateral discussions. Legal principles aside, regional political contexts often reveal a lack of diplomatic trust between neighbouring states. This problem is blatantly obvious within SAARC, but can also be found within ASEAN, where efforts at regional military coordination have been in the minority over the last ten years, despite the existence of dedicated mechanisms.

Finally, the problem of lack of capacity often leads the states in the region to turn to external partners who have the appropriate capabilities. The pooling of resources on which any idea of collective organisation is implicitly based is a (relative) fiction. HADR operations, once they reach a certain scale, most often consist of making resources available from the best-endowed countries to the poorest. This shows that there can be no real international HADR effort unless there is a major build-up of capacity in the coastal states of the Indo-Pacific. Existing efforts and mechanisms are certainly aimed at strengthening these capacities, but they essentially consist of pooling the resources of the endowed states, which therefore need to be identified in advance.

Finally, another challenge facing multilateral cooperation in the HADR field is the potential duplication of resources between multilateral organisations. Examples include the lack of coordination mechanisms between the IORA and the IONS, the need to strengthen political dialogue between FRANZ and the FIP, and the contribution of the QUAD initiatives for regional organisations such as ASEAN, which are already taking action in this area. In all the existing mechanisms, it is necessary to better identify the resources and capacities of the member states, to coordinate collective responses to crisis management more effectively.

B) HADR and regional influence in the Indo-Pacific

The impact of HADR operations, or more precisely, the influence they confer on the players conducting operations in this field, is difficult to measure, even though the literature on the subject asserts, without much qualification, that the diplomatic benefits gained by the players far outweigh the costs generated by HADR operations.⁷²

There is little doubt that these operations are greeted with relief and gratitude by the populations and governments concerned. HADR operations can only strengthen an already well-established influence. This was the case, for example, during the March 2011 disaster, when Japan suffered a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, followed by a tsunami and a nuclear

⁷¹ These principles are reiterated in the 2006 Oslo Guidelines *on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief*.

⁷² See for example Shishir Upadhyaya, *op. cit.*

accident, and the US mobilised almost the entire 7th Fleet to come to its aid.⁷³ However, it is not certain that this necessarily translates into political influence. The implementation of the FRANZ agreement in Tonga (cyclone Waka in December 2001, tsunami in September 2009, and cyclone Ian in 2014), Niue (cyclone Heta), Vanuatu (cyclone Ivy in February 2004), Fiji (floods in April 2004 and cyclone Evan in December 2012) and the Cook Islands (cyclones Meena, Nancy, Olaf, and Percy in February 2005), Ambrym Island (acid rain in March 2006), the Solomon Islands (tsunami in April 2007), Papua New Guinea (floods in November 2007), Tuvalu (drought in October 2011) and Samoa (cyclone Evan in December 2012), for example, may have boosted the image of Western countries in the Pacific, but they have done nothing to curb China's influence in almost all the countries that have benefited from FRANZ operations.

The scope of HADR operations cannot therefore be considered in isolation from a more global policy of influence, which identifies the concrete objectives to be pursued and the means to be implemented. This is made all the more necessary by the one-off, time-limited nature of these operations. In fact, HADR operations make it possible to mitigate the damage caused by exceptional events, even if their frequency is tending to increase. Their primary objective is to meet people's most immediate needs as a matter of urgency. The construction of infrastructure or the strengthening of capacities, on the other hand, are part of a long-term approach and aim to improve the existing situation. In this area, China stands out from its competitors. From the point of view of the Chinese Communist Party, HADR falls into the category of international development and is part of its wider "Belt and Road Initiative".

Thinking about the influence of a HADR operation therefore involves considering its various facets and combining the predominant humanitarian and security rationale with a diplomatic rationale, a media rationale, a relational rationale and a promotional rationale. However, it must be said that not all aid-providing countries integrate these different dimensions. For example, little effort has been made to date under FRANZ by the signatory states to capitalise politically on HADR operations. The contrast with the HADR operations conducted – or simply discussed – under the Quad is striking in this respect. The Quad was itself the result of naval coordination following the 2004 tsunami. The creation of the Tsunami Core Group, coordinating the post-tsunami operations of the US, Indian, Japanese, and Australian navies, paved the way, in the years that followed, for further cooperation within the Quad framework through joint military exercises and diplomatic commitments.⁷⁴ Today, on the other hand, it is the eminently political nature and composition of the Quad which, in a context of exacerbated rivalry with China, give the HADR operations discussed within this framework their full impact. The ASEAN countries in particular have taken a favourable view of the Quad's announcement to conduct a cooperation programme in the HADR field.⁷⁵ However, it will be necessary to back up the political dimension of this announcement with concrete avenues for cooperation, particularly in terms of capacity building for the countries in the region, if the initiative is to have any real impact in the region.

The question of the potential for influence concealed by HADR operations is therefore linked both to the international status of the participants and to their ability to link the operations themselves to a more sustainable project through the construction and dissemination of a narrative linking the former to the latter. In the case of the Quad, the participation of the US

⁷³ Shishir Upadhyaya, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ Saneet Chakradeo, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ Chen Christopher, "The Quad and HADR Operations: Prospects for Cooperation with Southeast Asia", 21 November 2022, RSIS Commentary, no. 119.

alone is enough to give the HADR operations their political dimension. But it is interesting to note that while all the members of the Quad share the same vision of China, they do not necessarily share the relatively confrontational approach of the US towards China. However, the politicisation of HADR is not without risk, with the possible exception of the US.

Whether or not it is possible to conduct HADR operations depends on the acceptance of the players by the states receiving the aid, and therefore on their perception of the possible risks involved in accepting the assistance. For example, some countries in the Indo-Pacific region have refused humanitarian aid from China because of political differences with Beijing. This was the case in particular with Indonesia, which in 2018 refused the deployment of Chinese military resources following the earthquake and tsunami that hit the country. Conversely, the Philippines agreed to the deployment of a Chinese military hospital ship after Typhoon Haiyan, even though bilateral relations were very strained at the time, so as not to give the impression of siding with the US. These examples show that the success of interventions cannot be measured solely in terms of an effective response to the needs of the recipient countries at the time of the crisis. Domestic political issues and diplomatic relations between states must also be taken into account and vary from case to case. While HADR can contribute to dialogue and cooperation between states, it may not be sufficient to resolve issues linked to a lack of trust between two parties.

Finally, the issue of influence must also be seen in the light of the recipient countries. Today, we can see a desire on the part of “small countries” to increase not only their resources, but also their ability to make choices in terms of policy direction and existing avenues of cooperation in the HADR field. This makes it all the more necessary to strengthen regional organisations. Regional forums such as ASEAN, the PIF, and the SPDMM are forums that enable individual countries to free themselves from the influence of outside powers and Sino-American rivalry. As researchers and experts of HADR, Lina Gong and Dhanasree Jayaram explain, “from a strategic point of view, cooperation in disaster relief enables the region [south-east Asia] to manage the implications of great power politics from a position of relative weakness, while maintaining ASEAN’s central role in regional security”. The underlying logic is that because outside powers have a significant interest in maintaining regional peace and stability, they are willing to be “entangled” in the regional security architecture.⁷⁶

Analysed in terms of influence, these considerations raise the question of French and European positioning on the issue of HADR from a new angle. It is no longer simply a question of coping with a growing number of catastrophic events and providing a response that is more or less adapted to the vulnerability of the populations concerned – from this point of view, no one is questioning French or, more broadly, European know-how – but rather of taking part in a competition in which the volume of conventional military capabilities is fundamental, even if it is not the only determinant of the effectiveness of operations. It is above all their transport, logistics, telecommunications, and personnel deployment capabilities that give the armed forces their importance in HADR. The hierarchy in this area parallels that of the armed forces themselves.

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DECEMBER 2023

⁷⁶ Gong, Lina, Jayaram, Dhanasree, “Status-seeking through Disaster Relief Cooperation”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 45, No. 2, August 2023, pp. 246-281