Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

New Multilateralism in Action for Peace: A Case Study of the US-led Operation Unified Assistance in the Asian Tsunami Disaster[1]

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ABSTRACT   *In the aftermath of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in December 2004, the ensuing multinational relief, humanitarian, and rebuilding efforts of the Operation United Assistance (OUA) are new examples of international cooperation to sustain and rebuild Asian communities in the post-9/11 security environment. An analysis of the cooperative efforts in light of differing theoretical perspectives provides a forum for debate on the nature of cooperation in the international arena and the implications for ethnic and civil wars in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Once described and explained by multiple theories, the relief operations can then be used to predict and perhaps even prescribe future international cooperation in natural disasters and conflict resolution in civil war environments. As a case study, this paper also examines international security strategies and the implications for economic prosperity and political stability in sovereign but weak nation states.*

Background

On the day after Christmas in 2004, an earthquake that registered 8.9 on the Richter scale struck the floor of the Indian Ocean, just offshore of the Aceh Province of Sumatra, Indonesia. The tsunami that followed destroyed coastal areas in multiple countries around the ocean, including India, Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and even as far away as Somalia—taking the lives of 250,000–300,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousands more homeless within a few hours.[2] The US Department of Defence mobilized a quick-reaction and logistical support network, with first responders hitting the ground in Thailand within 48 hours.[3] They began an emergency supply system that turned into a multi-agency, multi-national humanitarian relief response named the Operation Unified Assistance (OUA), which brought water, food, clothes, doctors with medicine, and building supplies to the impacted areas in Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

OUA presents a unique opportunity to analyse the driving forces of international cooperation in the post-9/11 environment. There is no inherent value gained by a single state offering its money and other resources to help rebuild another. What did motivate a multitude of states and non-state actors to get into immediate actions to

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salvage and restore communities within each others, especially those countries with whom the US does not share similar political views and human aspirations? How could a number of contemporary international relations (IRs) theories explain this modern case of large-scale spontaneous cooperation? There are multiple explanations, as we experienced first hand, each of which claim certain aspects of OUA as proof of its validity. Regardless of which theory carries the most weight, a single point becomes evident: OUA is a testament to cooperation among states at the international level.

In this paper, we explore a wide range of mutual national security intersects between a realm of IR theories and the world of empirical evidence to learn and reflect what worked and why. This paper provides some insights and lessons for future strategies and operations in international cooperation.

Opportunity for Hegemonic Influence

As electronic news of the disaster spread across the world instantaneously, the White House immediately began to formulate a plan to help, both financially and on the ground. This is not an unprecedented act by the US. According to Andrew S. Natsios, the Administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the American government regularly provides over 40% of all state-sponsored humanitarian assistance funds worldwide.[4] The US funds appropriated for OUA totalled $907.3 million. Over one third of those funds went to rebuilding Indonesia, one of the hardest hit nations. The White House noted that civilian and military personnel were deployed to the region to actively participate in relief operations, with a high of almost 16,000 military personnel delivering 10 million pounds of food and supplies.[5] This attests that the US had intentions and strategies to become involved with tsunami relief operations both immediately and for the long-term basis.

International relations realists like Robert Gilpin (1987) at Princeton University observed a direct relationship between the US activities in OUA and its current position as a world hegemonic act. In order to build strength in the global economy, the US must maintain the liberal economic order, the rule of law, and other international norms in democratic governance. In those geographic regions of the world, where the liberal economic order, peace, and democratic values have been weak or even as of yet non-existent—such as in Indonesia and Sri Lanka with their civil wars—the US has found a golden opportunity in OUA to pull them into a relative peace by guaranteeing to help rebuild their communities.

Thus, the US has demonstrated to the rest of the free world that an environment of open market and democratic stability could be achieved in previously war-torn societies, if they are open for future cooperation and wealth-building. Realists could point to the large American monetary support and active relief and humanitarian operations as evidence of US hegemony in the international system as a benevolent actor for the common good.

Regime Dynamics in Relief Operations

Some international media outlets became openly critical of the US and other powerful nations almost immediately after the earthquake and tsunami for not acting sooner or stronger. This negative media attention reached the American public and led to pressure on the US Administration to be more open and forthcoming on its relief and humanitarian support. The White House, USAID, Department of Defence, and US Military Commands have information on their unclassified websites about what, how, and when they are engaged with OUA. This reaction of the remaining superpower to media criticism seems to indicate an atmosphere of accountability, transparency, and democracy in action.

An important aspect of OUA is the fact that it is a multilateral coalition effort. Not only the US but other nations like Australia, Great Britain, India, Japan, and even Thailand have helped with relief operations. Likewise, international organizations such as the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Doctors Without Borders are also heavily involved with OUA. The dynamics of the operation changed as the situation on the ground changed. Within the complexity and fluidity of this multilateral operation, the initial military control ceded to civilian management in the first month of the operation as the short-term rapid reaction forces were joined by the long-term government and non-governmental reconstruction teams. The size and scope of OUA cooperation in terms of players and geographic area of operations is unprecedented, complex, and immediate.

The group dynamics of OUA will give reasons for liberal theorists like Robert Keohane (2005) to disagree with the conclusions of hegemonic stability theory. The accountability and responsibility, which seemingly important groups such as media outlets can wield against major nations, illustrate a lack of hegemonic intentions. Rather, the US seems to be a member of a group of liberal nations evolved with a common set of rules, norms, principles and decision-making procedures (Kaufman *et al*., 2004). As a coalition of like-minded nations, OUA can effectively manage relief operations as a cooperative endeavour, bound together by the common desire to achieve economic prosperity and freedom in the Indian Ocean region.

Some regime theorists fear that the abuse of power may occur; a fear to which the US has been particularly sensitive in OUA operation. Keohane (2005) has noted that the holding of powerful international entities, like the US and its military, for external accountability is difficult because they are powerful enough to avoid damaging repercussions and endangerments. Weaker entities, however—poor countries like Indonesia and Sri Lanka—can be heavily influenced by external pressure for transparency and accountability, specifically for fiscal or political initiatives that favour those entities acting as monetary benefactors. The fear is echoed by dependency theorists who are ready to mistrust any support provided by powerful states even while demanding the internal changes in governance structure (Kaufman *et al*., 2004). These theorists further argued that the powerful nations may use such a disaster as an opportunity to exploit for their own benefit, rather than as an opportunity to rebuild communities.

In a strong initiative to demonstrate goodwill, the US contained the vast majority of its military presence in OUA to the first 45 days. The sight of American military ships and aircraft around weak sovereign states was an intimidating and potentially

destabilizing effect for countries already battered by the losses from the natural disaster. To counter this effect, the US insisted on non-secrecy of OUA planning and execution—employing affected state representatives in the planning process at all levels, including the national control of airspaces and drop zones. The transparency was such that all operational information was organized and shared on the Asia-Pacific Area Network (APAN) website.[6] This strategy provided a quick exit of US military troops once civilian logistical supply chains were put into place for rapid implementation. This action was specifically designed to counter potential critics, who may view a large use of US military forces as a threat to national sovereignty.

Call for Greater Cooperation

The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami created a tremendous loss of life, collateral damage, and the disappearance of physical and social infrastructure in these economically poor communities. One significant aspect is that two of the hardest-hit nations—Sri Lanka and Indonesia—are both fighting militant anti-government movements within their borders, with a number of international networks to finance their civil wars:

- The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka.
- The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) of Indonesia.

The two militant and insurgent groups, which are considered as terrorist groups by the US State Department, have been essentially at war with their respective governments for many years. Such groups can exploit a major natural disaster for political gain among the local communities by magnifying government failures to act quickly to save lives and restore communities. Luckily for Indonesia, the GAM lost untold numbers of its forces in the tsunami, so the group was quick to come to the bargaining table for a cease-fire.

Sri Lanka, however, was not so fortunate with the LTTE. Although they had formalized a cease-fire in 2002, lower echelons of LTTE forces could not be trusted to uphold that agreement in the event of multiple relief aircraft flying across their airspace. Therefore, OUA logistical support had to fly from the south-east over the ocean to the north, then inland to where the Sri Lankan government maintained an isolated pocket of control so that relief supplies could reach impacted communities without interdiction by rebel forces. If these militant groups could gain a ground-swell of support, it is possible they could break down the legitimacy of the democratically elected governments.

Failure of any internationally-recognized government causes destabilization within that state, and it would threaten the neighbouring states due to the likely inter-state migration, as it happened among the Tamil population in northern Sri Lanka who left for the Indian state of Tamil Nadu during the earlier years of ethnic unrest and the ensuing civil war. Michael Doyle (2004) warns of this growing problem as it is beginning to become more of a regional and international problem than in years past. Therefore, destabilization in Sri Lanka will affect India, and destabilization in Indonesia has already proven to impact Malaysia, Australia and other nations in that region. This escalation calls for greater international cooperation to solve the

problem. As a liberal theorist, Doyle (2004) calls upon the United Nations for leadership against these destabilizing factors. In fact, as a proponent of Democratic Peace Theory, Doyle (2004) would seek assistance from wealthy liberal nations and the international community at large as a must for their own long-term human security. Seemingly in line with this thinking, the United Nations took over the relief operations in early 2005. According to Nile Gardiner of the Heritage Foundation, 39 of the UN agencies—including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—have been involved with rebuilding communities in the affected states.[7] The Democratic Peace Theory argues for a strong commonality in democratic norms of behaviour among democratic governments, while expecting no such bond between democratic and non-democratic nations. If peace and stability can be maintained among democratic states, then the threat of loss of a weaker democratic state such as Sri Lanka or Indonesia would have negative consequences on the collective community of democratic nations as a whole. It could potentially shrink that community; thereby, leaving the rest more vulnerable to similar attack. Thus, the helpful actions of other democratic states through the leadership of the United Nations in the wake of the tsunami would be expected. Those states will try to maintain their current numbers and may even use this crisis as an opportunity to strengthen Indonesian and Sri Lankan legitimacy as democratic nations.

Loss for One is a Loss for All

The powerful liberal nations of the world may be more dependent upon the Indian Ocean region than what either hegemonic or regime theories would suggest. The tsunami-hit Indonesian island of Sumatra forms the south-western side of the Strait of Malacca, which is one of the world's most strategic transoceanic maritime chokepoints. Piracy in these maritime routes has already been an ongoing problem in this region before the earthquake and the tsunami that followed. New oceanic topography created by the tsunami, the confusion engendered by large-scale population upheaval, and a weak government already beset by internal strife would indicate opportunity for an escalation of piracy in the Strait and the vicinity. That could potentially have a major negative impact on international security and economic growth if it disrupts the flow of goods, especially the oil shipments, through the Strait of Malacca. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, there is another concern to the world economy: Indonesia's natural gas exports, which come largely from the Aceh region of Sumatra.[8] As the home to the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia is increasingly becoming more integrated with other nations regionally and globally; therefore, any interruptions in maritime matters and violent piracy and ethnic unrest would destabilize the region, especially when a number of democratic initiatives and liberalized trade strategies are at the infant stage in Indonesia.

Likewise, Sri Lanka could provide valuable services to wealthy states, which would be sorely missed if the effects of the 2004 tsunami were to devastate its trading economy and democratic institutions. Sri Lanka has a number of dynamic and growing textiles and clothing industry as well as a growing insurance and banking

industry.[9] Loss of these industries and services to natural disaster or the on-going internal strife would be felt in major democracies like India, Great Britain, and the US. These powerful nations are perhaps more interdependent with the tsunami-impacted nations than the first impressions seem to indicate.

Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane have explored the increasing power of non-state actors and the economic interdependence that fosters them in the theory of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977). In the case of OUA, the coalition-of-the-willing may be more of a coalition-of the-vested-interest. It is not to suggest that that the complex interdependence among the OUA states and the disaster-struck nations is symmetric or that there will be mutual benefits from the connectivity fostered by the rebuilding efforts. Rather, it is just a build-up of transnational ties through multiple channels, such as natural gas and textile exports, mutual interest in the Strait of Malacca, or even the multilateral environmental agreements like the Climate Change Treaty and the Kyoto Protocol. Complex mutual interdependency is understandably reflected in OUA and the urgency with which the international community has responded to the plight of the tsunami victims. A loss to Indonesia and to Sri Lanka would seem to be a loss to the entire network of interdependent states and the global economy.

Look for the Bright Sides

As it is said in the old adage, every cloud has its silver lining. Even in an event as cataclysmic as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, there can be triggers in the international system that would create benefits to the survivors and their nations in the long-run. Indonesia has long had trouble truly democratizing and modernizing itself. Relations with older democracies like Australia and the US have been lukewarm at best. Now, Indonesia has been hard hit by the natural disaster and its chief economic assistance has been from these very same donor states and the relations have taken a dramatic upturn. The US is particularly interested in opening up Indonesia to more foreign investment. As the *Wall Street Journal* has noted the Indonesian president has become quite interested in US investment in 2005, especially in major infrastructure projects and oil production (Mapes & Hiebert, 2005). This change in international relations is already connecting Indonesia with the greater world economy. Over the next few years, Indonesians will have more access to the world market and the share of its gross domestic products increases with the influx of foreign investment and globalization.

One of the earliest of globalization's chief proponents, James Rosenau (1997) describes the theory as the myriad processes whereby individuals, groups and institutions are impelled to engage in similar forms of behaviour or to participate in more encompassing and coherent processes, organizations or systems. Rosenau (1997) argues that the burgeoning international markets, interests, and facilities in recent decades have given impetus to this commonality, which has altered the face of world affairs. As an agent of globalization, OUA has been able to provide both recovery for Indonesia and opportune break through the forces of localization that had previously held sway in that state. Such interactions between global and local processes are observed by other receptive writers of globalization. Patrick Mendis (2005a, 2005b) calls this process a "glocalization", which he observed in a number of

country field research and case studies in Asia and elsewhere. Tensions between these opposing ideals may continue to cause internal conflict initially as Indonesia seeks to find its own path to a balanced international connectivity. In the end, the power of economic variables will likely overcome the fragmentation caused by glocalization as long as OUA can set a positive precedent through the recovery efforts.

Some have argued that globalization has irrevocably changed the nature of the international system. Private actors—such as NGOs, multinational corporations, and the philanthropic foundations—have been taking on more prominent roles in international relations in recent years. Shareen Hertel (2003) has pointed out that private entrepreneurial efforts have influenced multiple governments in meeting the health needs of their populations, donating medical supplies, and partnering with NGOs to channel private and corporate philanthropy into communities where they are most needed. In this actively evolving international system, Hertel (2003) suggests the need for re-evaluating the legitimacy of international public institutions. The United Nations' Oil-For-Food scandal in Iraq is an example of a public institution failing in both transparency to its member states and in accountability in its mission. With many actors, not only does globalization spread but it also changes the architecture and the centres of power. It is not just necessarily a drain of power away from the nation states to the markets but the democratization of power within the civil society, which is increasingly gaining influence in liberal democracies.

Equally, corporate shareholders are not completely independent of accountability though they may be less constrained by governmental supervision. The stakeholders—those consumers and communities affected by corporate decisions—have had a dramatic influence on the decision-making process. For example, "Green investing" and socially responsible investment are growing as concerned consumers demand more environmentally and socially friendly products and services. When the live video coverage of the horrific damage done by the tsunami hit American homes, consumers demanded corporate leaders to invest and support in the Asian region. As a wealthy nation of historically-generous people, Americans have demanded corporate and government leaders do whatever they can to help the people of the Indian Ocean region.

Sheer philanthropy is a national tradition in which Americans seem very proud to take the lead. The spirit of generosity has had its effects through NGOs, corporations, and even state decisions. USAID has actively worked with private companies, foundations, NGOs, and other civic societies to channel American generosity in feeding, clothing, sheltering, schooling and caring for vulnerable children in tsunami-hit areas.[10] One such effort between USAID and Mars Incorporated has been providing $2 million in clean water, shelter and other health care services for 200,000 vulnerable families in the Aceh Province.[11] In fact, the five themes of the USAID reconstruction programme are all focused on building self-reliance: (a) providing cash-for-work to individuals; (b) creating jobs through micro-financing to communities; (c) re-building schools, hospitals and public utilities; (d) strengthening infrastructure; (e) installing high-tech tsunami early warning systems. These constitute a set of collaborative and cooperative actions by all actors of globalization and glocalization.

Multiple Benefits of International Cooperation

OUA is a modern example of international cooperation amongst multiple states, international organizations, NGOs and private businesses. An analysis of the relief operation in light of various theories on international cooperation reveals multiple interests and multiple motivations by all parties involved. It is not to suggest that the analysis should place value on different theories based on the motivations that drive these nation states to cooperate. It is more useful to recognize the layers of motivations and interests that combine to drive a nation state into cooperation with others.

The US could achieve a number of objectives by joining and spearheading a relief operation such as OUA. Not only can it spread its sphere of political influence into previously indifferent states like Indonesia, it can also open up economic and trading doors for its own businesses for global market opportunities. OUA also adds the benefits of reinforcing mutual commitments from other powerful nations and appeasing a humanitarian-minded populace back home. Besides all this, the stability provided by an operation like OUA reinforces political balance in a region that has a history of instability and violence.

The benefits of cooperation to the victim nations are also large enough to be driving factors. Free help in keeping impacted populations alive and healthy, as well as restoring broken communities is an offer difficult to refuse. A nation like Indonesia may have to be politically cautious of the terms by which it receives aid from Western nations, because of its own internal struggle with anti-Western and radical Islamic groups. If the coalition is willing to be sensitive to such problems and allowing more direct guidance from the impacted nation, the legitimacy of the impacted nation can actually be bolstered by the positive outcomes from cooperation.

OUA was a brilliant example of such political sensitivity. Even though both Indonesia and Sri Lanka have been fighting internal battles with separatist movements before the quake and tsunami, strong allegiance between OUA and those governments made a dramatic statement to the separatists about who is in-charge and who has the backing of the international community. Within a week after the disaster, leaders from the GAM had signed a cease-fire agreement with the Indonesian government. This allowed the Indonesian Army to control food and supply distribution from the OUA airfields and landing zones to isolated villages, sending a clear message to the villages that it is the Indonesian government, not the GAM that is taking care of them during this crisis. The urgent nature of the relief operations allowed an influx of capital and long-term investment that will continue to shore-up the durability and power of the Sri Lankan and Indonesian governments in the long-run. In turn, this will be a stabilizing influence on the region, which will attract more foreign investment and international cooperation.

Conclusion

OUA has now established a precedent in international cooperation for humanitarian purposes. The operation proved that cooperation among states and other international actors can happen rapidly and successfully. An analysis of various factors that set the conditions and the extent of cooperation in this case study might yield some

predictive insights for future engagements. Instead of looking at the different theories on cooperation in juxtaposition against one another, one can gain more from looking at them in complementary fashion. Each argument finds justification in a different aspect of OUA. Behind each argument lie motivations, whether humanitarian, economic or political, that would help push each actor into a cooperative mode of operations with others.

American philanthropy alone may not be enough to convince the US to put large amounts of funds and other resources toward international humanitarian efforts. However, if the cooperation would provide opportunities to open up previously closed or isolated markets to American businesses and expose a state to democratic influence, then the US would have stronger reasons to become involved. Or, the opposite case could be made: If economic and political benefits may not be advantageous enough to persuade the US to cooperate, an upsurge of domestic philanthropic interest may convincingly add enough pressure for humanitarian intervention. Therefore, it is no longer enough to rely solely on a realist perspective or liberal theory in deducing how or why states might cooperate with each other. Rather, a layered approach that considers domestic and economic influences as well as national security implications will be better able to predict the future in cooperative efforts.

Clearly, OUA has become a successful example of the possibilities that can be achieved when the states work together with NGOs and international organizations. Collectively, they have provided crucial life-sustaining and livelihood-rebuilding supports to communities devastated by this major natural disaster. A careful analysis of different aspects of the operation yields the myriad of motivations behind actions taken by both the giving states as well as the receiving states. Many theories for international cooperation find their confirmation in this relief operation, which constitutes a number of valid points. The challenge now comes in the form of identifying how much weight different motivations hold with different states. A better understanding of human and organizational motivations will help us predict the likelihood and the extent of future cooperative efforts at the international level. In the meantime, OUA provides an extensive framework for studying international cooperation as it has actually happened. It will likely become a benchmark, whereby future international relief operations are judged.

Notes

[1] Jaime Alvarado served as the Intelligence Flight Commander and the Senior Intelligence Officer of the 374th Air Expeditionary Wing in the Operation Unified Assistance (OUA) in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami disaster. Professor Patrick Mendis teaches in the Master of Arts in Diplomacy Program at Norwich University and is the founder of the Tsunami Leaders Caring (TLC) Foundation. This article neither represents the policies of the US government nor the views of the affiliated institutions of the authors. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions offered are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Departments of Defence or State where both authors have served in the past or present.

[2] A case study of tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka as captured within the days of tsunami tragedy. See: http://grad.norwich.edu/diplomacy/directorscorner/01_24_05/index.html

[3] For example, Jaime Alvarado was notified within 12 hours and called into mission planning within 24 hours for C-130 tactical airlift support out of Yokota Air Base in Japan before she was deployed to Thailand on New Year's Day.

[4] Andrew S. Natsios, *US Strategies for Relief and Reconstruction Assistance in Response to the Tsunami*, See http://www.usaid.gov/press/speeches/2005/ty050210.html

[5] The White House, *US Support for Earthquake and Tsunami Victims*. See www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/tsunami

[6] Asia-Pacific Area Network (APAN), *Operation Unified Assistance: Tsunami Relief Information Exchange*. See: https://ares.apan-info.net/QuickPlace/tsunami/Main.nsf/h_Toc/e69e058632ec4f5b0a256f7c00271350/?OpenDocument

[7] Nile Gardiner, *Congress Should Investigate the United Nations Tsunami Relief Effort*. See: http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm952.cfm

[8] US Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook 2005. See: http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/

[9] Ibid.

[10] Op cit., Natsios.

[11] USAID, *Tsunami Reconstruction*. See http://www.usaid.gov/id/documents/newsletter/tsunami_update_081705.pdf

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