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Author(s)	Gregson, Wallace C. ; North, James; Eldridge, Robert D.
Citation	国際公共政策研究. 2008, 12(2), p. 37-47
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/11094/4562">https://hdl.handle.net/11094/4562</a>
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# Responses to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: A Future Vision for U.S.-Japan Combined Sea-Based Deployments\*

Wallace C. GREGSON\*\*, James NORTH\*\*\*, and Robert D. ELDRIDGE\*\*\*\*

## Abstract

This paper was originally written as a policy recommendation in the fall of 2004, and published in Japanese in the journal of the then-Japanese Defense Agency, *Securitarian*, in three installments in the spring of 2005 (April, May, June issues). Shortly after the authors had completed the policy recommendations, the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami tragically hit the region. The scenarios we had envisioned in the paper were very much like the disaster that struck. The U.S. military took the lead in the response and facilitated the cooperation of international society at various levels, and Japan played an important role, too, but the concepts developed in this paper weren't utilized bilaterally and thus remain relevant today. Specifically, this paper proposes that the U.S. and Japanese militaries develop the joint and combined capabilities to be able to deploy together for humanitarian purposes.

**Keywords:** humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, sea-based deployments, U.S. military, U.S. Marine Corps, Japanese Self-Defense Forces

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\* The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of United States Department of Defense or the United States Marine Corps.

\*\* former Commanding General, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific.

\*\*\* former Center for Naval Analyses Representative, III MEF, Okinawa.

\*\*\*\* former Scholar-in-Residence at Marine Corps Forces Pacific, Camp Smith, in Hawaii, and an associate professor at the School of International Public Policy, Osaka University.

## Introduction

Throughout the world, disasters pose a real threat in many countries, both developing and developed. In a matter of days a prosperous society can be damaged or destroyed by a series of calamities, including those caused by typhoons and earthquakes, as seen in the Kobe-Awaji Great Earthquake some 10 years ago and in the Niigata-Chuetsu Earthquake in October 2004. More fragile societies can be destroyed by similar calamities, as seen more recently in South and Southeast Asia. The instability caused by natural and man-made disasters can have serious consequences for not only the country affected, but for the immediate region and larger global community as a whole.

Unfortunately, there is no standing or systematic international capability to help to mitigate the effects of these disasters. For this reason, plus the equally important objective of continually strengthening the U.S.-Japan partnership, we believe a combined US-Japan sea-based capability to deal with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief is necessary. Development of this capability is possible through the combined efforts of our two countries and by doing this, we could do much to reduce the suffering generated by the many disasters experienced throughout the world each year.

## Nature of the problem

Crises, disasters, and other man-made and natural calamities alter the human environment from its normal condition to an abnormal state. In response, societies intervene during and after the disaster with the initial objective of stabilizing the situation and in the long run, to return social and economic conditions to the way they were prior to the disaster. Often foreign assistance is sought, including military assistance, to help stabilize the situation.

Disasters can be categorized as natural disasters, man-made disasters, and complex emergencies. Natural disasters refer to calamities that are wholly the result of natural conditions, like earthquakes, typhoons, and floods. Man-made disasters refer to disasters that are caused by industrial activities, like oil spills. Complex emergencies result from economic, political, or social disasters that are likely to cause conflict. Each type of disaster results from different, but often inter-related vulnerabilities in the affected areas.

These vulnerabilities include poverty, repression, ethnic conflict, discrimination, and weak government institutions. Also, population pressures force people to live in low-lying areas that are most vulnerable to the effects of these storms and the resulting flooding that follows. These vulnerabilities affect both a society's preparedness to prevent potential disasters from occurring and a society's ability to mitigate these catastrophes once they have occurred.

There are a large number of disasters that occur each year around the world. Many of these results in appeals to the international community for help. The largest number of appeals for assistance result from disasters caused by storm and flooding. For both of these, there are approximately 20 appeals for international assistance in a given year.

These disasters follow different time patterns. Mainly these differences are reflected in the amount of warning time prior to disaster striking. Volcanoes, earthquakes, and storms have the shortest warning period, as little as 24 hours, while droughts can have longer warning time ranging up to several months. Most disasters require a relief effort of approximately one month's duration in order to stabilize and set conditions for recovery through self-help. Naturally, the relief required and time depends on the magnitude of the disaster and the size of the relief effort. During the period from 1990 to 1997, 15 of 16 disaster-relief operations that the United States Navy and Marine Corps participated in ended in a month.

There are also a large number of complex emergencies.<sup>1)</sup> The United Nations identifies complex emergencies as occurring when there is a total or substantial breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and where international assistance is required. Unlike natural disasters, these emergencies do not seem to resolve themselves in a short period of time. Complex emergencies can remain a problem for years. A troubling trend is the growth in the number of complex emergencies. In 1997, the United Nations identified 14 areas where complex emergencies were occurring. By 2002, five years later, the number of areas involved in complex emergencies had increased to 21 and in 2004, there are 26 UN-identified complex emergencies. Complex emergencies do not follow a predictable pattern. The warning time for these disasters is quite irregular and the period during which relief is required is also difficult to project. It is also difficult to de-

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1) To be considered a complex emergency by the United Nations, at least 300,000 people must be affected.

termine what relief efforts can successfully fix the problems.

## Past U.S. and Japan humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

The United States military and Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF) have participated in a large number of HA/DR operations in recent years.

The U.S. Marine Corps and Navy, for example, conducted 19 disaster-relief operations between 1990 and 2000. Table 1 shows a list of these individual disaster-relief operations. Most are responses to typhoons and hurricanes.

Table 1. Major disaster-relief operations in which Navy or Marine Corps forces participated<sup>2)</sup>

Disaster	Name	Year	Country
Storm		1990	Tunisia
	Hurricane Hugo	1990	Antigua
	Typhoon Mike	1990	Philippines
	Hurricane OFA	1990	Guam
	Mud Pack	1990	Philippines
	Sea Angel	1991	Bangladesh
	Balm Restore	1991	American Samoa
	JTF Marianas	1992	Guam
	JTF Eleuthera	1992	Bahamas
	Typhoon Paka	1997	Guam
	Fundamental Response	1999	Venezuela
	Silent Promise	2000	Mozambique
Earthquake		1990	Philippines
		1993	Guam
	Avid Response	1999	Turkey
Drought	Water Pitcher	1992	Micronesia
	Provide Relief	1992-1993	Somalia
Volcano	Fiery Vigil	1991	Philippines
	Hot Rock	1992	Italy

In the first half of the 1990s, U.S. naval forces participated in 49 HA/DR operations. These included Operation Provide Relief in late 1992 and early 1993 which provided drought relief in Somalia, Operation Water Pitcher, which provided drought relief to Micronesia in 1992, and JTF Marianas which provided disaster relief and power restoration following a typhoon in Guam in 1992. In the latter half of the 1990s, for example, US Naval forces along with the US Air Force responded with transportation and needed sup-

2) Gaffney et al, *US Naval Responses to Situations, 1970-1999*, Dec 2000 (CNA Research Memorandum D0002763.A2)

plies during Hurricane Mitch in Latin America.

Japan's participation in HA/DR, on the other hand, has been primarily under the auspices of the United Nations. Through this experience, the JSDF and other Japanese participants, such as police, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and non-profit organizations (NPOs), have gained experience and knowledge of the civil-military and logistics tasks typically associated with these operations. While the Japanese have used naval assets to respond to these emergencies in the past, this is typically not the primary means of response. Normally, Japan responds by flying its forces and support to the site of the HA/DR. In contrast, US naval forces have typically operated from a sea-base aboard amphibious ships.

In support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, JSDF and other Japanese specialists were instrumental in transporting relief supplies to displaced persons in East Timor during 1999 and 2000. Once again, the JSDF provides support to the UN Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET) from 2002 to now. Japan has dispatched approximately 700 JSDF personnel to provide a variety of engineer capabilities to include maintenance and repair of roads, and management and maintenance of water systems in East Timor. Similarly, Japan's dispatch of the SDF to Iraq has been vital to the humanitarian assistance and nation-building efforts of the international community.

#### **OPERATION SEA ANGEL: A successful example of humanitarian assistance using sea-basing**

A highly successful international effort to reduce suffering in a country experiencing a disaster was Operation Sea Angel (OSA). In the early 1990s, Japan and the US participated in this operation that may provide the best example of how we should plan to operate in the future. On April 29-30 1991, Bangladesh was struck by Cyclone Marian. The resulting devastation was beyond the capability of the Bangladeshi government to handle alone in the short term. Winds and tidal surges from the typhoon were so severe that the Bangladeshi government estimate 139,000 people died and millions were left homeless. In addition, estimates show that 1 million cattle died and crops on 74,000 acres were destroyed. The worst damage was along a coastal area in Southeast Bangladesh.

Several countries, including the United States and Japan, responded with financial sup-

port. To further assist, the United States and several other countries, including Japan, provided military and non-governmental organization assistance. Japan provided two helicopters that were extensively used to move supplies and a 50-man disaster relief team. The U.S. provided seven amphibious ships, a large number of aircraft and 7500 military personnel. The U.S. military operation came to be known as Operation Sea Angel.<sup>3)</sup>

OSA was conducted from 11 May to 13 June 1991. Military forces provided assistance almost entirely from a sea-base with no more than 500 service members on shore at night out of 7500 service members involved. It was conducted in a benign environment with no weapons carried by U.S. forces. Control of the military operation was synchronized with the efforts of NGOs from Japan, the U.S., and other countries. In the end, there were almost 2000 aviation flights carrying 4000 tons of supplies. Surface landing craft carried another 1500 tons of supplies. In addition, the military forces provided direct medical assistance to a large number of people. An estimated total of 1.7 million people were assisted by the efforts of this disaster assistance team.

The approach taken in controlling the operation was critical to its success. The system for controlling the operation actively involved U.S. military forces, the Government of Bangladesh, and the NGOs. The U.S. government was intensely interested in: 1) supporting the Bangladeshi government's efforts to provide effective support to their populace; 2) quickly bringing the disaster under control; and 3) maximizing the disaster relief effort. The Bangladeshi government made final decisions on priorities. The military forces provided transportation of supplies, advice and technical expertise, and a limited amount of equipment. The Bangladeshi government and NGOs provided the supplies. This outline of responsibilities worked relatively well with the Bangladeshi government clearly being the decision maker.

Sea-basing was also a major feature of this operation. The U.S. wanted to minimize the "footprint" ashore and maximize the availability of the amphibious forces. The U.S. did not want to appear to violate the sovereignty of Bangladesh and it wanted to ensure that the Bangladesh government was in control of relief efforts. Other reasons for sea-basing included the lack of infrastructure ashore. During a disaster, much infrastructure is de-

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3) For detailed studies on Operation Sea Angel, see Paul A. McCarthy, *Operation Sea Angel: A Case Study* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1994) and Charles Smith, *Angels from the Sea: Relief Operations in Bangladesh, 1991*, (Washington DC: US Marine Corps History Division, 1995).

stroyed. By sea-basing, the force could concentrate its relief where needed without taxing the local infrastructure. The relief could be flown by helicopter directly to the area in need without causing any additional impact. There was also a desire to avoid cultural conflicts between the military forces and the local populace. It also reduced the threat of terrorist attack. With considerable waterborne illnesses in the area of operations, sea-basing minimized the threat of disease to military forces. To do this, seven amphibious ships were employed with aircraft and landing craft carrying people and supplies ashore.

OSA showed that many military skills are transferable to and exercised in humanitarian assistance operations. Military skills in reconnaissance, assessment, transport, logistics, aviation skills, medical skills and several engineer skills were used extensively in OSA. Military skills in the operation of amphibious ships were also used extensively. It also emphasized a need for skills not normally derived from military training. These include the ability to coordinate with non-governmental organizations. Since that operation, the Center of Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance was created by the US Congress and headquartered in Honolulu, Hawaii, USA (next to Tripler Army Hospital) to provide militaries with training on how best to coordinate with non-governmental organizations and with governments that are being assisted in HA/DR operations.<sup>4)</sup> Numerous training sessions have been held in Japan or involving Japanese participants, a trend we hope continues in the future.

### **Sea-basing: How reducing the footprint ashore helps**

There can be little or no warning before a disaster strikes. This is followed by an assessment period where the local government determines the extent of the damage and when it is too large for them to handle, they make an appeal for help. If the disaster were in Java, Indonesia, and amphibious forces were in Okinawa, although strategically located, it would still take approximately seven days to move the amphibious forces there. For most disasters occurring in East or Southeast Asia, afloat amphibious forces have sufficient time to arrive and assist ongoing relief efforts.

Sea-basing allows Japan and the U.S. to bring enough equipment and supplies to sup-

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4) For more information, see the Center's website at <http://coe-dmha.org>. The Center also publishes a journal called *The Liaison* four times a year.



port both our forces and provide limited supplies to the local community without the need to rely on the infrastructure or supplies from the affected area. This allows the scarce resources ashore to be fittingly distributed to the needy population. It also allows the early introduction and distribution of NGO personnel and supplies.

By keeping most forces and equipment afloat, this increases the flexibility of the relief effort. Forces can be tailored to go ashore for a particular mission, finish it, and return to the sea quickly. A sea-based or amphibious operation enhances the ability of the force commander to respond to changes in the situation by more rapidly moving forces back on to the amphibious ships and moving to new crises. This also allows the commander to selectively offload equipment based on the disaster requirements that will evolve over time. From the initial disaster assessments to the time that forces arrive, force and equipment requirements may change. A sea-based force permits the commander to select equipment and forces that will be most appropriate for the local needs.

Sea-basing will reduce the perceived threat of the assisting force to the local government. While the objective of HA/DR operations is to assist the local government, the technological and organizational advantages of Japan and U.S. forces could make the sovereign government's abilities pale by comparison. Sea-basing reduces the visibility of relief forces and allows them to enhance the reality and the perception of the local government's success at dealing with the disaster. It reduces the perception that U.S. and Japan forces are in control of the relief efforts. During OSA, the Government of Bangladesh was initially reluctant to seek assistance from the international community for fear that this force would violate the sovereignty of Bangladesh. Instead, a sea-based force responded and enhanced the positive perception of the Government of Bangladesh for quickly bringing the situation under control.

A related advantage of sea-basing is that it allows the relief force to rapidly control its level of assistance based on the local government's degree of acceptable behavior. In other words, if a U.S. and Japanese relief force is asked to provide assistance to a third country but corrupt elements of the local government disrupt our assistance activities, we can quickly withdraw our assistance until the local government gains control over these corrupt elements.

Foreign military forces introduced into any country, including U.S. and Japanese forces,

can create an adverse cultural impact. Differing religious and social customs can cause a local community to perceive a potential threat. In OSA, the commander was concerned that non-Muslim customs of the relief forces could negate any benefits derived by the assistance OSA forces provided to the local populace. Sea-basing enabled a tailored, appropriate level of interaction between the local population and the relief forces and thereby reduced this threat, something that is particularly of concern in the cultural implications of the Global War on Terrorism. Similarly, a sea-based approach will mitigate any concerns over the “history question” regarding Japanese involvement in Southeast Asia and make it easier for local governments to welcome Japanese military cooperation.

In a complex emergency that includes significant lawless elements, sea-basing can reduce the terrorist attack threat to U.S. and Japan forces. Amphibious ships provide a good platform for force protection. This reduces the potential threat from terrorists. The smaller numbers of forces ashore make force protection more manageable.

Sea-basing also reduces health risks to the relief forces. In OSA, cholera and other diseases were quite prevalent and the commander sought to minimize exposure by keeping few forces ashore and by rotating the shore-based force to reduce exposure to disease.

Finally sea-basing reduces reliance on in-country airfields and ports. In many disasters, these may be damaged or require some improvements to reduce risk. Further, they pose force protection challenges. Airfields and ports may also be needed by NGOs and others bringing in supplies, and thus sea-basing reduces the congestion that might be found at these facilities.

### **Proposal for U.S.-Japan Combined Sea-based Humanitarian Assistance Capabilities**

The U.S. and Japan should develop a combined sea-based humanitarian assistance capability along the lines of that demonstrated during OSA. The merits for such a move are clear. This capability would require U.S. and Japanese forces to train together and be available to respond to the many unexpected disasters that require international involvement. The sea base platforms that are most relevant to humanitarian activities are found in the amphibious ships that the U.S. Navy and the Maritime Self Defense Force have in their inventories. These capabilities include good helicopter handling and hanger facili-

ties, a flight deck large enough for at least one helicopter, adequate aviation fueling equipment, including requisite fuel filtering and purification systems. Landing craft, air cushioned (LCAC) are required that can actually go from the sea onto land to off-load men and equipment. These amphibious ships need good medical facilities and berthing for ground forces to embark on the ship. In addition, adequate command and control facilities are needed.

All US amphibious ships (LHD, LHA and LSD-41 classes) meet these requirements. The Maritime Self Defense Force will be able to meet all these prerequisites with its 8900-ton LST, the JDS Osumi. The Osumi has superb helicopter facilities and is LCAC-capable. In addition, the U.S. Marine Corps trains and operates off a sea base. They are capable of going ashore with a tailored force, performing a particular humanitarian assistance mission and returning to the sea base quickly. Japan's Osumi class ships offer the opportunity to build a similar amphibious capability skilled at conducting humanitarian assistance operations from a sea base.

To become a combined force, we will need to train together. Through exercises and workshops, we can build a standard operating procedure for combined sea-based humanitarian assistance operations. We will also need to ensure that we can communicate with each other. This may require an investment in communications equipment that allows seamless communications between U.S. and Japanese forces. These efforts will ensure that U.S. and Japanese forces can cooperate efficiently and effectively.

## Conclusion

The idea that the United States and Japan might combine forces to develop a sea-based humanitarian assistance capability that is not perceived as militarily provocative or politically sensitive is attractive. Translating this concept to real world operations will do genuine good for people in distress.

This capability can also assist in the global war on terrorism. In that war, we are also attempting to enhance the reality and the perception of the local government's success at dealing with terrorism by reducing the visibility of foreign military forces. As with HA/DR, we are attempting to minimize the presence ashore in order to enhance force protec-

tion and minimize adverse cultural impacts from the presence of foreign military forces. Finally the sea-based forces increase the flexibility of the force in dealing with elusive terrorist threats.

A combined U.S.-Japan sea-based capability will do much to reduce anarchy and lawlessness in the region. This force will come with significant firepower and will be capable of expeditiously and efficiently responding to lawlessness and anarchy that might arise in the region, and affect the interests of both countries. As the October 2004 report by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's Council on Security and Defense Capabilities correctly points out, "international peace cooperation activities conducted in distant places can contribute to the defense of Japan."<sup>5)</sup> Participation as called for in this article would be in line with those recommendations.

Further, it will show the region the value of the U.S.-Japan way of doing things. It will show to the region and the world what we already know—that Japan and the U.S. are caring nations that are ready and willing to respond to the world's problems. The caring attitude shown by this combined force will go a long way to winning the war of ideas in a world where extreme elements supporting terrorists are trying to show us in a different light.

This force fits into the terms of the Japan – U.S. Security Treaty, which, in addition to defending Japan, is focused on maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and building a more stable international security environment. Actions taken by this combined force would fit into the framework of this security cooperation. They would involve cooperation and participation in UN peacekeeping operations and international humanitarian relief operations. They would also involve cooperation in emergency relief operations in response to requests from governments or international organizations in the wake of large-scale disasters. Finally it would create a set of Japan-U.S. security cooperation habits that can do much to reduce suffering in the world.

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5) The Council on Security and Defense Capabilities, *The Council on Security and Defense Capabilities Report: Japan's Visions for Future Security and Defense Capabilities*, October 2004.