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PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN DISASTER RELIEF: A MACHIAVELLIAN OR ALTRUISTIC APPROACH?

BY

COLONEL JAMES L. MILLER
United States Army Fellow

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U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

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Colonel James L. Miller
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Dr. Alan Stolberg
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

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During the 2010 floods in Pakistan, commentators viewed disaster assistance as a way to combat extremism and create goodwill for the United States in a region that is of great concern for US foreign policy. The concept of providing American support for foreign disaster relief efforts as public diplomacy in support of US strategy rather than for purely humanitarian purposes is not new and has long been a concern of nongovernmental relief agencies as well as certain US governmental organizations, including the military. This study will examine whether disaster relief should be used for political ends by the United States. It seeks to enhance understanding of this approach to disaster relief and determine its viability, likely outcomes, and impact on operational and strategic planning and foreign policy. This project will examine the likely success of this approach based on polling results of countries that have received disaster relief from the US, to include Indonesia, Pakistan and other countries in Latin America. Finally, it will identify comprehensive strategies and corresponding US government responsibilities for foreign humanitarian assistance and public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy and Foreign Disaster Relief: A Machiavellian or Altruistic Approach?

Increasingly since 2001, the United States has engaged in a war of ideas with extremist Muslim organizations and this contest has, according to many commentators, come to the point where it has fundamentally changed the U.S.'s approach to foreign humanitarian assistance. In the most easily observed form of foreign humanitarian assistance, foreign disaster relief, many believe we have found an ideal "weapon' to counter extremist narratives about the U.S. and to gain or improve the nation's geopolitical standing in foreign public opinion. At the same time, those who provide humanitarian assistance such as nongovernmental organizations, USAID operators, and even the U.S. military have very specific reasons for opposing this public diplomacy approach to what should be something that is purely humanitarian and altruistic. What should the U.S. policy be? Should the U.S. seek geopolitical gains from foreign disaster relief as part of a public diplomacy effort? This paper argues that Americans already do, examines whether it works and recommends the U.S. should continue to seek to achieve strategic aims using disaster relief as a tool in specific, well thought out, and comprehensively planned campaigns that protects humanity while achieving U.S. strategic goals.

Public diplomacy is a range of activities that seek to promote the national interest and the national security of the United States through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics and broadening dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.[1] It is a similar concept to the Army's Strategic Engagement; strategic engagement involves keeping friends at home, gaining allies abroad, and generating support or empathy for the mission in the area of operations.[2]

Recently the devastating 2010 floods in Pakistan created a great deal of interest in the humanitarian aid as a public diplomacy conundrum. Washington commentators, think tanks and Congressional leaders have all argued for increased emphasis on humanitarian assistance to Pakistan as a way to counter radical Muslim beliefs and narratives about the United States.[3] Both the Bush and Obama administration seem to have adopted this approach. However, senior administrative officials continue to publicly favor a more selfless logic for humanitarian assistance.[4]

The U.S. does not have a stated policy on the use of disaster relief as public diplomacy and normally tries to publicly emphasize that humanitarian aide is for humanitarian purposes alone. However, this is changing and the connection with public diplomacy is unmistakable and clearly evident in the State Department's Strategic Plan and recently published Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR). The goal of humanitarian assistance in the Strategic Plan "…is to save lives, alleviate suffering, and minimize the economic costs of conflict, disasters, and displacement…humanitarian assistance is also the genesis of the transition to long term political, economic, and social investments that can eliminate the root causes of conflict and displacement."[5] The QDDR includes a clearer focus on why the U.S. provides disaster relief, "…for both moral and strategic reasons we will continue to do so…"[6] The QDDR clearly signals a transition to more emphasis on public diplomacy in foreign disaster relief.

This is not really a change in the U.S. approach. In 2005, a study supported by the National Science Foundation examined all foreign U.S. disaster relief from 1964 to 1995 and found that foreign disaster relief is historically always a political decision rather than a humanitarian one; "…our results paint a picture of high U.S. foreign policy decision makers as realists at heart, seeing disasters as opportunities to enhance security."[7] The trend since 1964 is

one of using disasters for geopolitical ends and the recent U.S. efforts while seemingly novel are really just a more vocal expression than what has been the norm.

Is making disaster relief part of U.S. official public diplomacy efforts likely to succeed? Polling organizations that have examined this question have shown some success in changing foreign public opinion.

Both the Pew Research Center and Terror Free Tomorrow conducted polling in Indonesia following the December 2004 tsunami and came to the conclusion that American disaster relief efforts changed Indonesian public opinion about the United States. Polling showed an increase in support from 15% in 2003 to a high of 44% in 2006. Terror Free Tomorrow's study found that 60% of Indonesians believed that American assistance, especially in the form of U.S. Navy hospital ships, made them feel more favorable toward the U.S. and the study makes the conclusion that disaster assistance changes opinion. More importantly, both polling efforts in Indonesia show that a sustained aid effort by the U.S. over several years following the tsunami maintained high levels of support for the U.S. in public opinion.[8]

The polling after the Pakistan Earthquake of 2005 shows mixed results. Again Pew and Terror Free Tomorrow conducted polling (both used the same Pakistani polling agency) and found that American assistance after the earthquake had changed Pakistani public opinion about the U.S. Although Pew claimed improvements in public opinion, their results were not statistically reliable. Pew shows just a 4% increase following two years of an averaged 5% per year increase in public support, not really solid evidence to support their claim. On the other hand, in a poll done after the Pew polling, Terror Free Tomorrow reports a dramatic increase to 46% support (up from 21 %) for the U.S. following the earthquake and that 81% of Pakistanis felt that earthquake relief was important in forming their view of the U.S. Most surprisingly, they found

that of all Pakistanis who called themselves "bin Laden supporters," 79% had a favorable view of the U.S. immediately following the American relief effort.[9] The best evidence from polling in Pakistan is found in a new study completed by the World Bank that very clearly and irrefutably shows the success of humanitarian assistance in changing public opinion. That report demonstrates that those Pakistanis who were closest to the earthquake fault line and consequently received the most assistance and personal contact with identifiable foreigners now trust Americans and Europeans more than members of their own villages even 4 years after the earthquake. "The results provide a compelling case that trust in foreigners is malleable, responds to humanitarian actions by foreigners and is not a deep-rooted function of local preferences."[10] In this last report it is also interesting that the pollsters determined that Pakistani support for America and Europe was tied to how often they saw a helicopter with two rotors, something fairly unique to U.S. military forces.

Only anecdotal reports have emerged so far from the U.S. response to the 2010 floods in Pakistan, polling is in the works or incomplete. Initial reports are not very favorable as widely despised drone strikes by the U.S. and the unparalleled scope and scale of this disaster negated the positive effect of the U.S. flood relief effort. In a recent development, Osama bin Laden has recorded three messages recently; all press for Muslim relief efforts in Pakistan and perhaps indicate his own desire to compete against western efforts in a battle for the hearts and minds of Pakistanis.[11]

American disaster relief efforts in Latin America are harder to measure as support for the U.S. is already very high and similar disaster related polling is not as prevalent in the region. However some reports suggest that Venezuelan influence is improving as they use a very active

humanitarian assistance program as a form of public diplomacy and attempts to compete regionally with the United States.[12]

The impact of humanitarian assistance in changing public opinion toward the actor providing the assistance appears to have an effect in all of these studies, some better than others. That effect appears to be a short term one where the effort is not sustained or other messages are allowed to take precedence. In Indonesia there seems to be a longer term affect due to the continued employment of U.S. Navy assets over several years to continue and build upon the initial life saving efforts following the tsunami.[13] Pakistan's results are different and only demonstrate a long term effect that is directly tied to how close people were to the disaster, the amount of aid they personally received and how much exposure to foreigners they had as a result.[14]

While polling shows the potential for success, competition with others also affects the outcome; both state and non state actors can limit or reduce the public diplomacy benefits of humanitarian relief. In the Americas, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez competes directly with U.S. disaster relief efforts using a public diplomacy strategy of branding relief aid with his own picture and "one upping" the U.S. response while publicly undermining the intent of U.S. assistance.[15] More importantly, competition with other U.S. policy actions can rapidly sink the public diplomacy efforts of American disaster relief. Current American relief efforts in Pakistan are in direct competition with the U.S. drone attacks in the tribal regions. Recent polling shows many Pakistanis believe the U.S. is an enemy as a result of those attacks. Further dampening the effect of the Pakistani flood relief efforts is the comparative competition of the U.S. effort in Haiti which had wide ranging international media coverage. Putting such a visible effort into Haiti was important but when compared to the larger but less visible effort in Pakistan, it would be

relatively easy for Pakistanis and other key audiences to deduce that the less publicized Pakistani flood relief is just for show.[16]

While a public diplomacy approach to disaster relief can work, there are several important concerns with using humanitarian efforts as a means for diplomatic or strategic ends. The biggest concern for public diplomacy is that politicizing aid makes the message less effective.[17] Simply put, if the recipients of aid believe the U.S. is providing aid to change their minds and not to save their lives, the effort backfires and produces the opposite result. This explains why senior American officials publicly emphasize the altruistic nature of U.S. disaster relief.

There are two other humanitarian and ethical concerns that the U.S. must weigh seriously as well. When states compete on a geopolitical strategic scale through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, they make humanitarian organizations and their people a potential target for violence. Competitors will quickly realize the advantages of driving certain organizations out of the affected area using violent means to accomplish those ends. The result would be potentially devastating to the people who need the assistance as well as deadly for humanitarian assistance personnel and ultimately would result in the complete failure of American public diplomacy efforts; all unacceptable outcomes. There is also a concern that a public diplomacy approach to disaster assistance ultimately creates a focus on "useful victims." Those are people who need help and are useful to meeting U.S. end states as opposed to victims who just need help. The fear is American leaders will provide assistance to "useful victims" and ignore many victims and disasters which do not suit the needs of U.S. strategy. The final concern for the public diplomacy approach is competing with the NGOs for limited resources. Switching the U.S. approach to a military support model could limit resources for everyone and in the end limit the success of the

humanitarian efforts. [18] These humanitarian concerns must be included in any consideration of a public diplomacy approach to foreign disaster assistance.

All of this suggests that there are several keys to success in achieving a valuable public diplomacy outcome through foreign disaster relief.

- Humanitarian concerns must be at the forefront both for humanitarian reasons and for the effectiveness of the public diplomacy effort. As polling in Pakistan shows, those who actually receive aid are most likely to have a long term favorable opinion of the U.S. Conversely, people who heard about the aid but had no personal experience with it quickly lost their high opinion of the U.S. The key to success is to conduct humanitarian assistance for humanitarian reasons and not that of gaining an advantage from public diplomacy.
- There can be no "useful victims" or at risk humanitarian assistance personnel if the U.S. intends to achieve strategic public diplomacy outcomes.
- The World Bank report clearly shows that human contact and relief supplies that are recognized as being American work best; visible and identifiable U.S. actions speak louder than words.
    - Chinook helicopters in Pakistan
    - USNS Mercy in Indonesia
    - Clothing/Uniforms of providers
    - Branding relief supplies
- The U.S. must be capable of recognizing and competing with those who would compete against its efforts while maximizing/protecting NGOs. At the same time, the U.S. needs a cohesive plan that is not in competition with other U.S. messages and actions.

- Speed and volume of disaster assistance are important measurements of commitment and allow the U.S. to compete.
- Long term repeated aid and assistance efforts will sustain the improvements in public opinion after the initial life saving.

The United States is already conducting a public diplomacy campaign through disaster relief efforts and has been doing it for years, although somewhat haphazardly. Polling shows this to be a fairly successful method for public diplomacy and national policy directives have all but codified it as U.S. policy. Although the U.S. is a generous nation, it is not purely altruistic in the way it provides foreign disaster assistance; there is a Machiavellian side to disaster relief. The U.S. must officially recognize this and create a more comprehensive approach that coordinates all forms of U.S. national power and improves the delivery and effectiveness of disaster aid as part of its national strategy both for humanitarian and strategy reasons. Public diplomacy should not drive the train; national strategy must be the driver. Failure to do this will result in outcomes similar to what we have seen in Pakistan since the 2005 earthquake; huge Pakistani public support for the U.S. squandered away by a failure to sustain more than local efforts, a perceived weak response to the current flooding crisis, humanitarian assistance personnel and their organizations at risk, and an inability to address the obvious conflicts between our humanitarian efforts and the collateral damage caused by U.S. drone attacks in the tribal regions of Pakistan.

Public diplomacy intends to send a message as a way to achieve strategic goals. The U.S. must determine who and how we are synchronizing, coordinating and controlling the national effort to achieve the message through foreign disaster assistance. If actions convey messages then better action and better coordinated actions convey clearer messages. Although the new Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review signals a very positive change, disaster relief

currently is reactive and builds in a haphazard and illogical way influenced by media attention, strategic interests in the region, and the availability and sustainability of military forces. This haphazard build up confuses and weakens any public diplomacy efforts and provides room for competitors, either America's own policy or the actions of other competitors, to interfere with America's intended strategic outcomes and puts humanitarian assistance personnel at risk. If the U.S. is to achieve public diplomacy ends through disaster relief, it must create a system that provides both humanitarian ends and diplomatic ends without one reducing the influence of the other. This is a critical requirement that the U.S. must determine as it implements the new QDDR recommendations.

There is a concept that Rebecca Winthrop from the Brookings Institute called "conflict sensitive development" that provides some ideas about how the U.S. could proceed to further public diplomacy gains.[19] In this concept the U.S. must design foreign development programs focused on reducing or eliminating the likely conflict in that country or region. It is an important concept the U.S. could also use in response to disaster relief since disaster relief is a stated means toward conflict resolution in U.S. national policy. The U.S. government can fairly accurately predict the types of natural disaster each nation in the world is most likely to deal with, and in some case, can even predict when the disaster is most likely to occur. At the same time, there are existing conflict specific or diplomatic outcomes the U.S. is seeking in those countries or, at the very least, there is an analysis of the effect a major disaster would have on U.S. national security. The U.S. must be able to collate this data before a disaster whenever possible and conduct conflict sensitive disaster relief through proactive efforts and when required, a preplanned response to be most successful at achieving both humanitarian and public diplomacy objectives. As the effort

transitions from disaster relief, the mission would ideally evolve into the ongoing long term development plan for that specific country or region.

As the U.S. implements the strategy laid out in the QDDR, new governmental structure and planning processes must direct the type and volume of disaster relief effort appropriate to the strategic objective specific for each disaster. This is especially true when the U.S. is reacting to an unforeseen disaster. When there are specific significant public diplomacy goals, visible and identifiable relief supplies and human to human contact works best and military operations receive the most positive support according to all polling data reviewed. When there is no public diplomacy outcome desired, less visible means of humanitarian relief may be the right choice. Finally, to achieve U.S. goals and sustain the message, unity and synchronization of efforts are absolutely critical to achieve and must tie the initial phases of disaster relief to the long term follow on recovery and development in the disaster area.

The polling demonstrates the military is a very effective means to achieve a desired public diplomacy effect and the U.S. already relies heavily on the military for the initial rapid response, life saving and build up in disaster relief. The use of the military also does not have the downside of putting civilian assistance personnel into a position where they may be physically at risk. Therefore, as the State Department and USAID implement the QDDR, the military is likely to be given an increased role in support of State Department directed foreign humanitarian assistance as well as disaster assistance under this model. The new Army Operating Concept seems to be pointing in that direction already and the Defense Department's Instruction number 3000.05 is very specific about the military requirements in this area.[20]

The U.S. military is capable now of making improvements that will support public diplomacy objectives and should take several steps in support of this effort. Each service and Regional Combatant Commander should work to increase the training readiness and the speed and volume of response to disasters. Regional commanders will require dedicated forces they can plan for and count on for disaster relief on short notice. These forces include airlift, sealift and ground forces that are immediately available or assigned to the Command's area of operations. Military disaster relief plans must support State Department and USAID objectives and identify appropriate force packages and place them on a force deployment list so commanders can prepare for their most likely deployments in support of disaster relief. There must be a new emphasis on public affairs units and detachments deploying early that are prepared with training, language skills, and resources to engage the host nation and regional media, as opposed to the U.S. media, in support of public diplomacy. Additionally, Regional Combatant Commanders along with their State Department counterparts in many cases have already established long term programs that prepare host nations through theater security cooperation and exercises to both receive aid from U.S. forces and enhance both national and regional capabilities to deal with humanitarian and disaster relief operations. These programs, like the civil military emergency management program in NATO, go a long way to establishing and sustaining relationships that both ensure future disaster relief success and proactively achieve our nation's goals often times long before a disaster occurs. Currently under Defense Department control, these programs must continue under State Department direction.[21]

The QDDR has the U.S. pointed in the right direction and sets the tone for the model I've outlined for public diplomacy through disaster relief. The implementation of the QDDR is critical and must create an outcome that better aligns U.S. words and deeds in the field of humanitarian

relief. The implementation must ensure the existence of a system that is directed by the National Security Staff, led by the State Department, with USAID as the lead execution agency for the interagency effort and the military fully prepared to support disaster relief in support of State Department leadership. The new process must create a proactive planning approach to disaster relief that uses a conflict specific model to achieve the best possible strategic outcome through public diplomacy, protecting humanitarian assistance providers from harm, and saving lives.

In the end, deeds speak louder than words. The proper QDDR implementation and the changes I've recommend will make the U.S. better at disaster relief. The better the U.S. does at providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, the easier it will be to support public diplomacy and the better the strategic end state. It is a proposal that requires the U.S. to first focus on improving humanitarian assistance, followed by protecting humanitarian assistance providers and then getting the public diplomacy message out.

There should not be an argument over whether the U.S. is providing disaster relief for purely altruistic reasons. Well led, properly organized and well planned disaster relief focused on saving lives gets to the desired public diplomacy end state. A focus on improving our altruism is the best way to achieve American strategic goals. It is a bit Machiavellian, but that's the answer.

Notes

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