

theirview

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The Indian Navy's humanitarian impulse

It has played a leading role in humanitarian missions since the 2004 tsunami—a potent way to project India's diplomatic soft power

One of the defining characteristics of navies in the postmodern era is their involvement in irregular security missions. From anti-piracy to anti-trafficking, counter-terrorism and migration control, the scope of unconventional security tasks undertaken by maritime forces in recent years has expanded significantly. The most prominent of these tasks has been Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), aimed at helping populations in coastal areas survive natural calamities. Since the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, when giant waves originating in the waters off Sumatra submerged huge swathes of coastal South and South-East Asia, disaster relief has formed an important part of the broader mission-set of maritime forces.

The Indian Navy has played a leading role in humanitarian operations in the Indian Ocean littorals. Beginning with the 2004 tsunami, when 19 Indian naval ships conducted relief operations in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Maldives, the Indian Navy and Coast Guard have regularly participated in HADR missions in South Asia, West Asia and even the South China Sea, carrying out relief operations, search and rescue and emergency evacuations of people in need of urgent assistance.

Over the last fortnight, the Narendra Modi government showed once again why humanitarian assistance remains a vital component of India's regional political outreach. After major floods and landslides killed over 200 people in Sri Lanka, Indian naval ships rushed to provide relief to the affected people in the island state. In what was widely reported as the worst spell of rainfall since the 1970s in Sri Lanka, Indian naval vessels played a key role in stabilizing the island nation's flood-affected areas, providing critical relief supplies and medical assistance.

New Delhi was quick to respond to an appeal for assistance by the Sri Lankan government, dispatching naval ships within hours of the first report detailing the scale of the unfolding tragedy in Colombo. The *INS Kirch*, on its way back from deployment in the Maldives, was diverted south, even as the *INS Shardul* and *INS Jalashwa* were ordered to sail with dispatch for relief operations. A day later, the *INS Sumitra* was involved in a search and rescue operation in Bangladesh, where cyclone Mora had caused significant destruction of property and life. The Indian warship rescued 33 people swept into the sea by the cyclone—the second time in less than a month that Indian naval assets had been involved in a rescue of this nature, after *INS Kirch* and a Dornier aircraft carried out a search and salvage operation off the Maldives, recovering a local landing craft lost in the waters between the Thulusdhoo and Gan islands.

The Indian Navy's humanitarian impulse also manifests in the many evacuation operations from countries in the grip of political turmoil and

rapidly deteriorating security conditions that Indian warships have undertaken in recent years. In April 2015, Indian ships were involved in the safe evacuation of over 2,000 Indian expatriates and over 1,300 foreign nationals from an intense combat zone in Yemen. Indian naval ships have previously carried out rescue missions in Libya, Lebanon and Somalia, where political turmoil left scores of Indian nationals stranded in conflict zones with little hope of survival.

Even so, India's governing elite know that the Indian Navy isn't the only security provider in South Asia. Like other occasions in the recent past, the Colombo floods witnessed an active contribution from many other regional maritime forces, including the Chinese navy, which sent three warships, and the Pakistan navy. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy's humanitarian efforts in the Indian Ocean have been a trigger for disquiet in India's defence establishment. After Chinese warships evacuated 35,000 Chinese nationals from Libya (2011), and PLA navy specialized vessels carried out a search for the remains of Malaysian airliner MH370 in the southern Indian Ocean (2014), India's naval leadership suspects Beijing might be using humanitarian operations to boost its security and diplomatic influence in South Asia.

Unfortunately, the Indian Navy's humanitarian cause has been adversely affected by the absence of a dedicated platform for disaster relief missions. Unlike the US and China, whose navies have hospital ships fully equipped for medical assistance, India deploys regular warships and amphibious vessels converted for search, rescue and relief missions. In terms of both optics and utility, India's improvised platforms do not match the US navy's medical ship *USNS Mercy* or the PLA navy's *Peace Ark*—custom-made hospital ships that enable specialized medical services on a grander, more visible scale, allowing for the leveraging of humanitarian service for diplomatic gains.

Still, India's keen involvement in multiple relief missions in Asia is a reminder that as natural disasters become more frequent and intense, New Delhi's contribution to humanitarian missions will rise incrementally. With the growing urbanization of coastal areas, Indian naval ships will increasingly find themselves at the forefront of rescue and relief effects in disaster-hit states. Inevitably, Indian vessels will be first on the scene, rendering critical life-saving assistance in the early hours of a natural disaster, as in the case of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh recently.

The Indian Navy's humanitarian mission is likely to remain a key factor in India's projection of diplomatic soft power and a potent symbol of New Delhi's neighbourhood-first policy.

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Indian vessels recently played a key role in stabilizing Sri Lanka's flood-affected areas