

10TH CSCAP GENERAL CONFERENCE: CONFIDENCE BUILDING IN THE ASIA PACIFIC – THE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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SESSION IV: COOPERATION ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Building Greater Mutual Trust through Disaster Relief Cooperation

Delivered By Garry Ibrahim

The Asia-Pacific remains the world's most natural disaster-prone area, according to the United Nations Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific in 2014. It reports that 41.2 per cent of the world's natural disasters between 2004 and 2013 occurred in the Asia-Pacific region, or 1,690 incidents. The number of deaths caused by natural disasters also increased, largely attributed to the effects of a handful of catastrophes that took place or affected the countries of CSCAP committee members. These include the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake in Pakistan, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, the 2010 heat-wave in Russia and the 2013 impact of typhoon Haiyan on the Philippines.

Moreover, despite a recent slowdown, the Asia-Pacific remains the fastest developing region in the world and one of the main growth drivers in the global economy, accounting for over two-fifths of global economic growth. With this growth comes greater emphasis on regional connectivity. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) predicts that routes to, from and within the Asia-Pacific will grow at 4.9% each year to reach an extra 1.8 billion annual passengers by 2034, accounting for 42% of global passenger traffic. However, with economic growth and increasing connectivity, the risk of human-made disasters also rises. Countries in the region have witnessed disasters such as the loss of Malaysia Airlines MH370 in March 2014, and the massive explosions in Tianjin, China in August 2015.

Thus, responding to disasters continues to pose an important challenge to countries in the region. Past experiences have underscored the great importance and benefit of adopting a transnational approach to executing humanitarian and disaster relief work. Super typhoons can hit multiple countries, earthquakes can strike regardless of borders, and aircrafts can crash anywhere, including in disputed areas. This is an area of cooperation that can bring countries together, uniting them under a common endeavour to achieve a mutually beneficial goal, similar to cooperation on addressing climate change, countering terrorism or eradicating poverty. Traditionally, responding to natural disasters has brought countries in our region closer, enhancing trust and reducing suspicions.

Cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief can significantly contribute to building the mutual trust and confidence required to address divisive challenges. This area of cooperation brings together military, civilian, non-governmental stakeholders as well as other actors under a powerful emotional common objective of saving human lives. The interaction through exercises and actually implementing relief activities allows key agencies the opportunity to share information and understanding, as well as build personal relationships. Greater mutual trust and confidence is also mutually reinforcing, as it further strengthens countries abilities to collectively respond to disasters, by removing the suspicion a country may have over accepting foreign assistance. Furthermore, this area of cooperation can be viewed as people-centred, inline with the ASEAN Community's Post 2015 Vision.

Notably, recognition of the importance and benefit of multilateral cooperation in humanitarian and disaster relief work has manifested in an array of mechanisms and processes to facilitate and support this work in the Asia Pacific. This includes the work under:

- *ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER); an ASEAN Agreement with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO); a ASEAN Declaration on Search and Rescue in 2010; the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) Blueprint; the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC); the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue; and the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) and the ASEAN Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT); a clearly defined role for the ASEAN Secretary General; as well as work under the ambit of the East Asia Summit (EAS) including a Statement on Rapid Disaster Response in 2014; the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) including the Work Plan for Disaster Relief from 2015-2017; the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM); ASEAN Naval Chiefs Meeting; and the ASEAN Maritime Forum.*

Moreover, countries in the region have continued to convene numerous regional disaster relief exercises, which build familiarity and coordination amongst key actors, as well as contribute to greater mutual trust and confidence. Two notable examples include:

- *Brunei Darussalam, in its capacity as Chair of the East Asia Summit (EAS) hosted the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief and Military Medicine Exercise in June 2013. This event involved the deployment of approximately 3,200 personnel, 7 ships, as well as military medical, engineering and search and rescue teams and assets from all 18 ADMM Plus participating countries. The exercise scenario was based on a Typhoon hitting a remote community in Brunei Darussalam. The exercise aimed to enhance military practical cooperation, test ASEAN's*

experience and existing mechanisms, and enhance military-to-military interoperability and coordination.

- *Malaysia and China co-chaired the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) on 24-28 May 2015 in the Malaysian states of Kedah and Perlis. This is a biennial event aimed at creating a disaster resilient region. The exercise tested civil-military coordination efforts, created synergy, and synchronised efforts towards supporting the effective implementation of the AAMER as the common platform for disaster management of the region. The exercise also continued the progress made by the previously held ARF DiREx. The overarching scenario of the exercise was a super typhoon impacting the Northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. This full-scale disaster simulation tested the expertise of the participants as well as tests the available mechanisms at the national, regional and international level.*

Based on the large number of existing regional mechanisms and processes for humanitarian and disaster relief, there should be a deliberate move to consolidate and coordinate these efforts, as well as to avoid the proliferation of new mechanisms or processes. As a region, the most significant challenge in this area of cooperation has been implementing and executing all these plans when urgently required in the event of a disaster.

At the same time, it is vital that emphasis be placed on enhancing humanitarian and disaster relief cooperation that would have the greatest contribution to building mutual trust and confidence. In this regard, the following two proposals could be pursued with stronger political will:

- *Conclude work under the ADMM on direct communication links between defence establishments by 2015. Then, expand the membership of this arrangement to include ADMM Plus countries, namely ASEAN and Australia, New Zealand, India, Russia, China, the United States of America, Japan and Korea.*
- *Under the DOC, conclude the work to establish hotlines of communications between foreign ministries on maritime emergencies as well as cooperation on search and rescue by 2015. Then, continue to make expeditious progress towards concluding a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).*

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