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COLLECTIVE RESPONSE TO DISASTERS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Policy Report

July 2022

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Executive Summary

Collective action is key in responding to complex, large-scale disasters. The mix of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis and heightening geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific raises questions about how states and societies in the region can respond together more effectively to disasters. This policy report analyses the respective strengths and weaknesses of the existing multilateral mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific in facilitating and mobilising collective disaster response. It finds that the nature of these mechanisms, the level of the power symmetry within them, and the changing regional and global risks shape their ability to respond collectively and the effectiveness of those responses.

Introduction

Collective disaster response involving multiple countries and organisations is essential in complex, large-scale disasters when national capabilities and resources are inadequate. This need was seen in a number of previous disasters in the Indo-Pacific region, from the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 to the volcanic eruption and tsunami in Tonga in January 2022. Various multilateral mechanisms exist in different subregions of the Indo-Pacific which support collective response by facilitating policy coordination, confidence-building and operational cooperation. However, the evolving traditional and non-traditional security dynamics such as major power rivalry, the ongoing pandemic and climate risks raise questions about how these mechanisms can mobilise or facilitate collective action in disasters.

This policy report examines the respective potentials of five multilateral mechanisms in the region to respond to disasters collectively and the weaknesses that could hamper such collective action. The five are: ASEAN, FRANZ (France, Australia, and New Zealand), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and the Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC). We find that the nature and power dynamics of each mechanism as well as the changing regional and global risks affect its ability to respond collectively. This report was informed by interviews conducted between December 2021 and March 2022 with 19 participants from the Indo-Pacific and Europe, namely, scholars, diplomats, military officers, and humanitarian practitioners. This research was administered under Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board project number IRB-2021-762.

New and Challenging Realities in the Indo-Pacific

The COVID-19 pandemic is a game changer for collective disaster response. First, military involvement in the pandemic response is prominent, with many countries calling in their militaries to support national vaccination rollouts and deliver humanitarian aid to other countries. The pandemic highlights the need for military forces to strengthen preparedness and international cooperation in public health emergencies.

Second, organisations with humanitarian responsibilities have had to adapt to increasingly restrictive environments. An example of adaption is the increasing adoption of remote humanitarian programming.¹ In the wake of the double disasters in Tonga earlier this year, foreign militaries made contactless delivery of aid to avoid the spread of COVID-19 in the then virus-free country.

Third, the pandemic has catalysed changes of institution and priority in some of the multilateral mechanisms. ASEAN is in the process of establishing the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases to strengthen collective response to public health emergencies in the future. COVID-19 is a powerful reminder to states of the cross-sectoral and transnational impacts of such crises, exemplified by the outbreak of the Delta strain of the virus in India in 2021 and the lockdown of Shanghai in 2022. Such disruptions have forced the mechanisms that did not focus on health agendas such as the Quad and LMC to now prioritise pandemic-related cooperation.

Heightened political and security tensions within and between states in the region have also made collective response more difficult. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has increased debate on the relevance of neutrality in humanitarian action in complex environments as there are concerns that official humanitarian engagements with the Myanmar military could be tantamount to according it legitimacy.² One solution is to explore alternative channels and strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation. During the Delta wave in Myanmar in mid-2021, the Singapore Red Cross sent oxygen concentrators to the Myanmar Red Cross Society through the International Federation of the Red Cross, in contrast with Singapore's military-to-military assistance to Indonesia in the same period.³

¹ Campbell Aitken, "Remote Humanitarian Management and Programming Guidance Note", Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HH_PP_Guidance-Note_Remote-Management_electronic_FINAL.pdf.

² Fiona Tarpey, "Walking the Tightrope: Humanitarian Assistance in Myanmar", *Australian Outlook*, 8 September 2021, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/walking-the-tightrope-humanitarian-assistance-in-myanmar/>.

³ Calvin Yang, "S'pore to make regular oxygen shipments to Indonesia to fight Covid-19 surge", *The Straits Times*, 19 July 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-to-make-regular-oxygen-shipments-to-indonesia-to-fight-covid-19-surge>; Kok Yufeng, "S'pore to send 200 oxygen concentrators to Myanmar", *The Straits Times*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-to-send-200-oxygen-concentrators-to-myanmar>.

Geopolitical rivalry has turned disaster response into a tool for security competition, which is not new to the Indo-Pacific region.⁴ The competition between China and traditional donors in the region including Australia and New Zealand led to a rush to provide aid to Tonga after the double disasters.⁵ Provision of COVID-19 vaccines is now a priority in regional cooperation for both the United States and China, evident in the speeches of their defence chiefs at the Shangri-La Security Dialogue 2022.

Climate change is a threat multiplier. Communities and areas that were not disaster-prone are now increasingly exposed, exemplified by the catastrophic floods last year in cities in central China and those in the central and western parts of peninsular Malaysia.⁶ The likelihood of having to undertake concurrent disaster relief operations has become greater,⁷ which highlights the need for collective action to reduce resource constraints. But regional security dynamics such as those highlighted above pose a challenge to the ability of these multilateral mechanisms to enhance collective disaster response.

⁴ Alan Chong and Jun Yan Chang, "Security Competition by Proxy: Asia Pacific Interstate Rivalry in the Aftermath of the MH370 Incident", *Global Change, Peace & Security* 28, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 75–98.

⁵ Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, and Anna Powles. "Tongan disaster highlights lack of coordination in regional response", *The Strategist*, 28 January 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/tongan-disaster-highlights-lack-of-coordination-in-regional-response/>.

⁶ Aradhana Aravindan and James Mackenzie, "From China to Germany, floods expose climate vulnerability", Reuters, 23 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/china-germany-floods-expose-climate-vulnerability-2021-07-22/>; Rozanna Latiff, "Malaysia seeks UN climate adaptation funds amid deadly floods", Reuters, 27 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/malaysia-seeks-un-climate-adaptation-funds-amid-deadly-floods-2021-12-27/>.

⁷ Lucia et al, "Crisis Response in a Changing Climate", RAND Corporation, 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1024-1.html.

Multilateral Mechanisms for Collective Disaster Response

Humanitarian civil-military collective disaster response refers to the partnering in relief efforts of actors from different sectors, backgrounds and countries during a disaster. Such collective action can be conceived as a four-stage continuum, consisting of communication, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration, with varying levels of inter-organisational embeddedness:⁸

- (i) Communication represents the minimum level of collective response, involving mainly information exchange, which constitutes a basis for collective action at a higher level;⁹
- (ii) Cooperation refers to organisations working alongside each other to avoid duplication but only at a low intensity and with limited connections;
- (iii) Coordination, unlike cooperation, refers to activities such as sharing of information and resources to achieve shared goals;
- (iv) Collaboration represents a deep and long-term relationship, which in some cases is formalised by agreements, and features high levels of inter-dependency and shared risks among the partners.¹⁰

(I) ASEAN

According to the above categorisation, ASEAN demonstrates certain features of collaboration in humanitarian responses, particularly in the civilian component. Its regional disaster response system is based on the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response and supported by operational institutions.¹¹ ASEAN has been able to respond to natural hazards and man-made disasters in Southeast Asia, from the Marawi conflict in the Philippines in 2017 to the earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia in September 2018, although some of these operations were limited compared with responses by extraregional players.

The level of collective response among militaries, however, is lower, although the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus forums have facilitated regular confidence-building activities between ASEAN

⁸ Alistair D. B Cook and Sangeetha Yogendran, "Conceptualising Humanitarian Civil-Military Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific: (Re-)ordering Cooperation", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74 (2020): 1, 35–53.

⁹ Interview with a humanitarian practitioner based in Bangkok, March 2022.

¹⁰ Eric Martin, Isabelle Nolte, and Emma Vitolo, "The Four Cs of Disaster Partnering: Communication, Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration", *Disasters* 40, no. 4 (October 2016): 621–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12173>.

¹¹ Mely-Anthony Caballero, *Negotiating Governance on Non-Traditional Security in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, 2019), pp.141–170.

member states and their dialogue partners in the past three decades. Collective military disaster response in the region takes the form of multiple bilateral responses rather than a collective response under one regional banner. In the wake of the earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia in 2018, 18 countries, including some ASEAN countries, coordinated bilaterally with the Indonesian military forces to deploy military assets, rather than through the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Centre (RHCC), which was specifically set up to coordinate military responses in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.¹² The militaries in Southeast Asia evidently prefer to deal bilaterally in military HADR responses and only occasionally through regional mechanisms, which limits the depth of regional cooperation. This preference is rooted in their adherence to the principle of national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of third countries and strengthened by the rise of nationalism.¹³

The limited progress in ASEAN's effort to deepen cooperation in more sensitive security issues, including military response in HADR, leads to the concern that the grouping's centrality in regional security issues is being challenged by emerging mechanisms.¹⁴ The Quad, for example, has the potential to assume a greater role in collective disaster response in the region, given that each of the four participating countries is a traditional provider of HADR and their militaries have a good level of mutual trust and interoperability, which is essential for collective action.

(II) FRANZ

FRANZ is another active partnership in the Indo-Pacific. It is smaller but more flexible than ASEAN, with no established institutional structures. FRANZ is based on an agreement in 1992 between Australia, New Zealand and France, with the main objective of coordinating their relief efforts for disasters in the South Pacific.¹⁵ When a disaster strikes, the three countries divide responsibilities and roles and share information and assets through coordination at ministerial and embassy levels and with the authorities of the affected country.¹⁶ Annual official meetings and joint exercises such as the Southern Cross military exercise are the channels through which they maintain mutual understanding and interoperability.¹⁷ However,

¹² AHA Centre and UNOCHA, "Central Sulawesi Earthquake: International Deployed", 10 October 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/indonesia/central-sulawesi-earthquake-international-deployed-assets-10-october-2018>.

¹³ S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, "NTS Centre Panel Webinar on 'Humanitarian Futures in the Post-COVID-19 World'", 3 June 2020. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/event/nts-centre-webinar-on-humanitarianfutures-in-the-post-covid-19-world/#.XyKJS4gzblU>

¹⁴ Interview with a scholar in Asian security studies, Singapore, December 2021.

¹⁵ Helene J. Des Combes, "Franz Arrangement", *Liaison*, 2019, <https://www.cfe-dmha.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=l-rlkSrfs30%3d&portalid=0>.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand, "The FRANZ Arrangement", 2014, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/NZDRP-docs/Franz-Arrangement-Brochure.pdf>.

¹⁷ Interview with a foreign military officer, Singapore, February 2022.

changing geopolitical dynamics have given rise to uncertainties in the partnership. One example is Australia's abandonment of its contract to buy French submarines last September, which has cast a shadow on Australia-France relations.¹⁸ In addition, Australia's competition with China contributed to its rush to be seen as the first to deliver aid to Tonga in 2022,¹⁹ while France took action under the FRANZ banner nine days after the disasters.²⁰ Although Australia has made an effort to repair its relationship with France by agreeing to pay a compensation of US\$585 million for the scrapped deal, the incident has exposed the vulnerability of the multilateral partnership to geopolitics.

(III) IORA

IORA was established in 1997 to promote socio-economic cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. Disaster risk management is one of the group's six priorities, and India leads the coordination. As an economic grouping, it does not have the intention and capacity to respond to disasters directly,²¹ and collective response, if any, takes the forms of communication and policy coordination, at best. The grouping's adoption of the guidelines for HADR in September 2021 possibly indicates IORA's interest in increasing cooperation in disaster response.²² One potential avenue is for India to leverage its own resources and networks for disaster-related cooperation. In August 2019, India invited delegates from IORA states and the ASEAN Secretariat to participate in India's 4th Annual HADR Exercise in Chennai.²³ India's leadership in disaster issues within and without IORA can potentially support the organisation to assume a more substantive role in regional disaster responses.

(IV) The Quad

The Quad, consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, evolved from the core group of nations that provided relief after the Indian Ocean tsunami and was revived by the four countries in 2017. This framework has the material basis to respond collectively as all four countries are major providers of HADR. Mature bilateral or trilateral military partnerships among the four countries reduce potential

¹⁸ Colin Clark, "France dumps Aussies from 'strategic partnership' citing AUKUS sub deal", *Breaking Defense*, 24 February 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/02/france-dumps-aussies-from-strategic-partnership-citing-aukus-sub-deal/>.

¹⁹ Interview with a foreign military officer, Singapore, February 2022.

²⁰ France Diplomacy, "Tonga: Delivery of France's Emergency Assistance", carried on website of Embassy of France in New Zealand, 24 January 2022 <https://nz.ambafrance.org/Tonga-Delivery-of-France-s-emergency-assistance-24-January-2022>.

²¹ Interview with a scholar of Australian defence and foreign policy, Australia, December 2021.

²² IORA News, "21st IORA Council of Ministers Meeting on 17 November 2021 held by the People's Republic of Bangladesh", 17 November 2021 <https://www.iora.int/en/events-media-news/news-updates-folder/official-press-release-21st-iora-council-of-ministers-meeting-on-17-november-2021-held-by-the-peoples-republic-of-bangladesh>.

²³ Deon Canyon, "India leading international HADR Cooperation in South Asia", Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2021 https://apcss.org/nexus_articles/india-leading-international-hadr-cooperation-in-south-asia/.

bottlenecks in interoperability, communication and logistics during HADR operations. However, there are a few uncertainties. First, the commitment of the bloc to HADR fluctuates. HADR was included in the leaders' joint statement in March 2021 but absent in the one in September 2021.²⁴ During a virtual meeting in March 2022, the Quad leaders agreed to establish a new HADR mechanism to respond to future humanitarian challenges in the Indo-Pacific and facilitate communication on the Ukraine crisis.²⁵ This was followed by the establishment of the "Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific" after their most recent summit on 24 May 2022. This HADR mechanism represents the Quad's renewed interest in HADR.

Second, the notion of the Indo-Pacific is broad and vague, covering the vast space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. It is unclear how the Quad adds value to the existing regional landscape of disaster management. Third, the Quad remains a loose framework, with the four participating countries having different calculations on HADR deployment. Australia focuses on the Pacific and Southeast Asia,²⁶ while India sees itself as the primary responder in South Asia.²⁷ Perceptions about each of the four countries' commitment and ability to contribute to Quad activities have varied.²⁸ Coordinating their diverging interests and concerns would have an important bearing on their capacity for collective disaster response.

(V) LMC

Launched in 2016 to support socio-economic development in the Mekong subregion, the LMC consists of Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Although humanitarian assistance was mentioned in their declarations in 2016 and 2020, it is not a priority of the mechanism. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted greater investment in health cooperation, with the leaders pledging in 2020 to strengthen "collective response" to future public health emergencies. The enabling factors for collective action under the LMC banner include China's expanding foreign aid programme, friendly military-to-military relations between some LMC countries, and established institutions. However, while the LMC Secretariat has tracked disaster relief efforts undertaken by the grouping, these constitute predominantly China's bilateral assistance to the other LMC countries.²⁹

²⁴ The White House, "Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: 'The Spirit of the Quad'", Press Statement, 12 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>; The White House, "Joint Statement from Quad Leaders", Press Statement, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/>.

²⁵ The White House, "Joint Readout of Quad Leaders Call", Press Statement, 3 March 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/03/joint-readout-of-quad-leaders-call/>.

²⁶ Interview with a scholar of Australian foreign and security policy, Australia, December 2021.

²⁷ Interview with a researcher in South Asian studies, Singapore, December 2021.

²⁸ Interview with a scholar in Asian security studies, Singapore, December 2021.

²⁹ Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, "Bilateral Cooperation", 2022, http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/node_1009540_3.html.

General Observations

The cases above demonstrate that the internal nature of the respective mechanisms heavily influences their level of collective disaster response. ASEAN and FRANZ have clear mandates, established channels of communication, common identities or values as a basis of strategic trust, and, importantly, familiarity with other members' assets and work processes.³⁰ In contrast, IORA and the LMC, which prioritise socio-economic cooperation, have not been used as platforms to facilitate collective response in their respective subregions. As for the Quad, driven by the motivation of containing the growing influence of China, its leaders have tended to accord lower priority to HADR issues than to issues where they are in direct competition with Beijing, such as vaccine distribution, cybersecurity, climate change and infrastructure. This tendency of the Quad was reflected in the leaders' joint statement in September 2021, although the economic fallout from the Ukraine crisis has prompted them to increase their attention to humanitarian issues.

The power dynamics between countries involved in any of the mechanisms can influence the effectiveness of its collective action. ASEAN has been able to leverage its internal power symmetry and its perceived weakness vis-à-vis its more powerful dialogue partners to establish itself as the leading actor in disaster management and a major platform for related international cooperation. In mechanisms which feature significant power asymmetry, their focus and development are heavily influenced by the interest and investment of the dominant players, which is evident in IORA³¹ and the LMC. As the dominant player views the mechanism as its own sphere of influence, it becomes difficult to seek support and contribution from external sources.

³⁰ Interviews held in Singapore with military officers from two different countries, December 2021 and February 2022.

³¹ Interview with a researcher in South Asian studies, Singapore, December 2021.

Policy Recommendations

While the mix of established and emerging regional mechanisms gives rise to the hope for more sources and capabilities for disaster response, the multiplicity of mechanisms does not necessarily lead to more effective collective action. The partners within the various multilateral mechanisms should enhance their engagement and coordination with each other, which will in turn strengthen their complementarity and cooperation with other mechanisms and avoid competition and duplication.

- 1. The existing multilateral mechanisms should establish or adjust their respective arrangements for collective disaster response, taking into account the likelihood of disasters becoming more frequent, devastating and complex.**

The new mechanisms that are still finding their places in the regional landscape of disaster management, such as the Quad and the LMC, should provide greater clarity on their respective approaches to collective disaster response and the geographic areas of their operations. Such clarity will facilitate requests for assistance from countries affected by disaster.

The more established mechanisms that already have clear mandates for disaster response should ensure that there is greater synergy and coordination among their existing institutions and arrangements in line with the changing risks in the region.

- 2. Joint HADR exercises should remain a key avenue for confidence-building, and future joint exercises should reflect the new realities in their scenarios.**

The pandemic has significantly curtailed in-person interactions among the various partners in each mechanism, particularly the various militaries. This lack of effective and reliable engagement may have eroded the ability of the different militaries to respond collectively.³² Given its effective pandemic response and recovery plan, Singapore should consider offering to host joint meetings and exercises.

In addition, joint training and exercises should be designed to increase awareness among the officials involved of the evolving risks and their impacts on HADR and to prepare these officials for harsher operating environments.

³² Interview with a foreign military officer based in Singapore, February 2022.

3. Synergies should be created between different mechanisms to optimise the utilisation of resources, capabilities and facilities for disaster response.

Leveraging its diverse partnerships and mature platforms for multilateral cooperation, ASEAN should take the initiative to engage other regional mechanisms to exchange experiences and best practices in collective response so as to actively shape and enhance regional cooperation in disaster response. Countries that are involved in more than one mechanism can promote dialogue and exchanges between the mechanisms on possible arrangements to enable sharing of information, resources and facilities in the different subregions of the Indo-Pacific.

About the Authors



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Prior to joining RSIS, Nanthini was an intern at the Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore and has written for the *Young Diplomats* as their Regional Content Writer for Southeast Asia. Her research interests include human security in Southeast Asia, looking at the HADR landscape through a gendered lens and the role of multilateralism in the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific.

About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre)

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.



NTS Centre conducts research and produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building the capacity to address non-traditional security (NTS) issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre addresses knowledge gaps, facilitates discussions and analyses, engages policymakers, and contributes to building institutional capacity in Sustainable Security and Crises. The NTS Centre brings together myriad NTS stakeholders in regular workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as provides a networking platform for NTS research institutions in the Asia Pacific through the NTS-Asia Consortium.

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