

**Panel 3:**  
**Humanitarian Diplomacy in the Asia – Pacific**

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**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook,**

We had some very fruitful discussions this morning, and I think we are about to hear another very engaging discussion this afternoon. We planned it so that we have a similar set-up that I have had a number of questions which we've circulated before the event so these aren't surprise questions. And I will go to each of the panellists in turn to ask them their question and they will respond, and then we'll have a second round and then we will open up to Q&A. And for Q&A, please use the Pigeonhole, it's been working really well so far and then, we will have a discussion.

So, first of all, I'm going to turn to Jeremy. With his experience in the humanitarian sector over the last 20 years, we have seen a number of challenges, but also perhaps misconceptions about what humanitarian diplomacy is. And I'm wondering if you can just run it through that and perhaps what role strategic foresight has or doesn't have in shaping it?

**Mr Jeremy England, Former Head of Delegation, ICRC**

Yeah, thanks very much. Thanks to all the organisers for the opportunity and AI for that introduction. So first we're talking about humanitarian diplomacy, which is essentially the process of influencing decision makers or opinion leaders to act in the best interests of vulnerable people. So that's the aim of the exercise and the objective within that wider aim may vary substantially between high level diplomacy looking at changing global norms and laws, policies, resolutions at the United Nations, or else or it might be at a very practical field level, trying to ensure access to populations, trying to ensure security for those people who are going in, to support people trying to negotiate release of hostages, access to prisoners, the safety of convoys of aid, and so on forth. So, there are many different levels and objectives within the umbrella of humanitarian diplomacy. And just a little caution with that, there are many, many different agencies with different mandates, different ambitions, different cultural legal backgrounds. There are many different types of disasters. I will be speaking a little bit more about complex emergencies and conflict related disasters because that's where the majority of my experience is and I think others on the panel equally so.

But there are many other kinds of disasters and other issues that may warrant humanitarian diplomacy as well. There are different opportunities, there are different risks to humanitarian diplomacy and the context to vary. So that's a bit of an introductory

comment. The basics of humanitarian diplomacy, basic components are essentially the same. It's threefold. A proper assessment of what the problem is, the identification of a very clear strategy about how you're going to influence people's actions related to that problem, and then the dogged perseverance of implementation, which is not a one-off adventure, it's a long-term process. So just to unpack those three components, on the assessment side, we're talking first and foremost about understanding the problem you're trying to address, which starts with engaging the key stakeholders, the people in need. So, if we're not talking to those people and all elements of that population and working out who is the most vulnerable within that population, what it is they can already do for themselves, what's blocking them from doing more, what's blocking their agency from being fully expressed, and what is needed from the outside world, then we shouldn't start any form of humanitarian diplomacy. That's where it starts.

Once we understand well the challenges that the population in need are facing and the different inputs from different actors which are not yet succeeding to solve the problem and who's making those decisions, then you're in a position where you can start making priorities about what you want to intervene on. You have to do an extensive mapping exercise. You need to understand who the decision-makers are, what their processes for making decisions are, who influences those decisions, when those decisions are made, and under which other pressures. We often look for champions to support an idea. There are also opponents who do not want the idea. So, you need to do an extensive amount of mapping and analysis of that. Work out your risks. Sometimes bringing up an issue, for example, publicly, may cause more risk and less benefit for the population. Sometimes public is the best and only way to create the pressure you need to get an outcome. So, you need to look at those issues. You need to look at local protocol issues, cultural issues. And at the end of that assessment, you need to come up with what is your added value, what are you going to contribute there, what is it that your organisation and your message is going to change about that whole scenario?

By then you're in a position to make your strategic choices, what your strategy is going to be, and these are very conscious choices around what a realistic outcome is going to look like. What you're going to refer to? Are you going to refer to international obligations and legal frameworks and UN resolutions? Are you going to refer to national legislation, national development objectives, national customs, and processes? Are you going to refer to common values, religious principles? You need to work out which of

those is likely to be most effective for your goal. Even if you're deep down inside still guided by the international norms or the norms of the institution you work for. You need to work out your red lines, what you can't give up in a negotiation. You need to work out whether publicity will help or hinder, whether different partners are of assistance. Is a big network of players going to help you, like it did for the campaign to stop Landmines? Or is it actually much better to do it in private, discreet, one-on-one diplomacy, which it might be if you're trying to deal with a military commander about access to people that may be detained by military intelligence.

So there's very different targets required, very different channels of intervention. You need to work out your timing and understand your sequencing. Diplomacy is not a one-off issue. It's a constant, ongoing dialogue. So, your implementation will often depend on your organisation's credibility. How long is it committed to that context? What relationships has it built up? What intelligence does it have about these issues you're trying to influence? What standards do you have in your own delivery? What credibility do you have to offer, what's your history? And then you'll choose, and then you'll continue that work. The last point is you need to monitor the outcome of your diplomacy. Not only in terms of what's agreed in rooms and on paper, but on the ground with the population who you were apparently either empowering to do their own diplomacy or doing it on their behalf. So those are the essential components as I see them. Of course, in different regions of the world that's different. Here in Asia, you may well focus more on relationship-based advocacy, on discreet conversations. You may not choose to mount an international pressure campaign and think that's going to be your best tool in this part of the world.

You may go in with a spirit of seeking advice, offering expertise, looking at mutual interests to get outcomes. But at all costs, you have to be prepared to make the ask. Whatever your polite and correct approach to your diplomacy is, you've got to be brave enough to make the ask about what's needed for the people you're representing with as much charm and humour and decorum that you can bring to that exercise. How does foresight influence all of that? Or how did international organisations bring in foresight to their choice of humanitarian privacy? I'd just like to make it clear that in every single large international organisation that I've ever worked with or worked for, there has always been a regular, ongoing foresight process. I used to work for the International Committee of the Red Cross. We do our budgeting and planning year by year, but each

yearly plan has to match up to the responsibilities that we've already researched in the long term in terms of the scenarios and the risks that we see happening in the next ten to 20 years. So, and we have multiple divisions internally who are looking at. Evolution of weapons, evolution of urban violence, evolution of climate, environment and conflict, complex emergencies, and many other subject matters. And of course, we have innovation departments, and we have policy departments.

So, all of them are insisting that the annual planning matches 10-to-20-year priorities and are building capacity for that. Any other international organisation of any worth has the same range of internal foresight processes. They also participate in external foresight processes, World Humanitarian Summits, SDG processes, and so on and so forth, the COP process and so on. There's all of these different places where we have available futures to us which are integrated into our regular planning. And that's led to many positives. So, we foresaw many times things that have come to pass. The increased risk for health infrastructure and health workers was flagged 15, 20 years ago in a campaign. It's proven more and more relevant right up to today if you look in Gaza on your news sets today. We looked at the issue of urban warfare 20 years ago. We've been looking at new weapon systems. We managed to get outlawed laser blinding weapons before they were ever used on a battlefield. So, foresight is built into our thinking in the humanitarian sector.

But a caution, humanitarians are not there – let me put this another way – the credibility of humanitarians is that they bring facts to the table. They are supposed to be on the ground doing something, and they're doing it with partners. And populations, and they are informed by that. And so many times, the only reason humanitarians are invited to a wider policy discussion, is because they're the ones on the ground who know what's going on. So that's a useful credibility. And we see trends early and we can identify trends early and position ourselves for them and flag them. We have been flagging the food insecurity risks in Somalia for years. We've been flagging the urban violence that we're seeing in Gaza for years. We've been flagging the risks of autonomous weapons systems for years. The issue is, we will not go further than flagging trends into imaginary futures because we lose our credibility there. We're fact-based, reality-based organisations. We adapt in real time and to trends we see, but we don't easily fall into the trap of positioning for theoretical futures. I'll stop there. I think I've exceeded my time.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. Guo Yang, with your experience with the Chinese Red Cross Foundation, which has been engaged in public diplomacy on humanitarian issues, can you give us some insight into what public awareness is on humanitarian issues in China and the role that you've played in humanitarian diplomacy there?

**Dr Guo Yang, Deputy Secretary-General, China Red Cross Foundation**

Okay, thank you. Firstly, it's my great honour to join the discussion. So as a person who have worked for about 14 years with SRC, first, I very much agree with what you have said over the basics of humanitarian diplomacy. And now I'm going to address, I'm supposed to address the Chinese humanitarian diplomacy, which is an area, according to the speaker in the morning, is a unknown unknown area. I will try my best to figure out what I don't know. So, yes, as a member of the Red Cross movement, the Chinese Red Cross Foundation, our humanitarian diplomacy very much goes along with our international humanitarian aid projects, which starts in 2006. So, by the end of 2022, we have listed around 200 million RMB for projects in around 57 states. So, all these projects mostly focus on the healthcare infrastructure, emergency response, resilience in communities, and poverty reduction. But as for the general Chinese public awareness and engagement with the humanitarian issues, it comes only with the Chinese economic development and, especially the launch of the open reform policy and the promotion of people-to-people exchanges and the better known initiative.

So currently, we have more than around 1 million charities and social organisations. And besides the Chinese Red Cross, dozens of other foundations and charity organisations are involved in international humanitarian affairs. For example, I think during the Tokyo and the Syria earthquake, there are about 70 Chinese emergency response teams were dispatched for the earthquake over there. And our program in Syria and Afghanistan has attracted greater attention and support from the people. So, our public diplomacy or diplomacy goes along with the projects. So, in order to ensure the proper function of our projects and we need to engage and negotiate with all the stakeholders, but first and foremost is our own government. So, we need to first get the

green lights from our own government. In this regard, now it is not so difficult because I think the Chinese government has begun to notice our added value, our complementary status to the state diplomacy. But sometimes just as I said this morning, we need to make them get more idea about the fundamental principles, what neutrality and independence means, even though we use the money from the state, but we try our best to keep it neutral and especially independent, autonomous from the state foreign policies. And as for the recipient authorities, especially the local communities, we very much rely on our partners within the movement, I mean the local national authorities, national societies and especially the authority of the communities.

So, through them we can do the right assessment of the needs and even for the implementation process, because they know better than us. So actually, in terms of diplomacy or engage in the public democracy, there are three phases. At the very beginning it is very much we do it within China, which means we give money, we give money and material to the third parties, to the local society where they do their business. Then afterwards they sent us a report. And secondly, now more and more we do a mission on a case-by-case basis. I think that's the reason why you see I led a team of Chinese Red Cross to go to Syria and Afghanistan to do our own mission. So, in this regard there are two purposes. Firstly, we need to understand the local situation better and secondly, we need to also build up our capacity of field work. This is really important. And lastly, now I noticed and actually there are some Chinese foundations and social society, they have a permanent presence in the country. So this is also very important because especially yesterday I had some discussions with my colleagues who are based in Thailand, they can even have a better understanding of the local needs and have better engagement with the communities.

And there are also some very basic characteristics of our diplomacy firstly, and it is very much out of a sense of empathy. So, we always remember when we are in need, there are some friends who give their hands to us. So, we want to give in return. And secondly, as we trust people, we are very pragmatic and practical. So, our projects, our engagement is very much issue-oriented or results-oriented. So, to figure the needs is very important for us. What you need, we can give it to you. And last but not the least, you see, we just go there, we go there doesn't with a very special idea of the social model. So, we don't promote any specific way of governance, but we want to solve the problem. So, these are the basic factor of the Chinese diplomacy. And we also notice

actually we don't have a special body of diplomats within the Red Cross and even within any other Chinese social societies. So, in this regard, I think we need more efforts in the capacity-building. And this part I will address later. Thank you very much.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. Now, if I can turn to Isabel, coming from OCHA in Afghanistan and in the past 20 years of your career, you've engaged in many complex settings. I'm wondering if through that we've seen changes in approach, but how has that impacted humanitarian diplomacy?

**Ms. Isabelle Carlsen, OCHA Head of Office in Afghanistan**

Thank you, very much and good afternoon. So, I think in this particular session you've already heard from Jeremy the principles of humanitarian diplomacy. And I won't go back into the details of what he said, but I think I would like to illustrate it, and more specifically by telling you how this is happening in a country like Afghanistan today. We are in a very unique context, as many are, but in this particular case, we are in relation with de facto authorities and we're coming in at a time where this country has been at war in one way or another for 40 years. And so, we're in the midst of where everything, I think humanitarian has been trialled in Afghanistan, including very close Civ-Mil relationship with humanitarians and sometimes even beyond humanitarians, with militaries actually taking the role of humanitarians. So, we've seen a lot of different trials and error in that country and it's very interesting to see where we are at today when the war has ended and has ended in a very particular way. And if we look at what humanitarian diplomacy is all about, it's all about relationship, it's all about networks, it's all about being able to speak to one another and ensure that messages are understood and that alignment can happen, and alignment to serve the people.

The main objective of humanitarian diplomacy is about making sure that assistance is reaching the right, the most vulnerable communities that we are there to serve. And to do so we have to, for one, have access. And that's the lens I'm going to take for Afghanistan, because having access, we speak a lot about access in humanitarian diplomacy. We speak a lot about access when we are humanitarians. But what is



access? The main point of access is for the people we serve to have access to assistance and basic services. It's not necessarily about us. We often make it about us, but it's really about the people we serve. But to do that, to ensure that those services are there, that the assistance is delivered, that is adapted, we need as humanitarians and sometime as a wider community, to have access to these people. And assistance is not only about shelter and clean water and food, but it's also about protection. And that's one of the key elements of I think you talk about changes, Alistair, that's one of the key changes in the recent year is that humanitarian diplomacy is yes, about convoys going in with food and blankets and water and medicine but it's also about how do we protect these people?

And so, access is, yes, negotiated sometime with other countries of the region. It can be the case. In the case of Afghanistan, access is about negotiating with de facto authorities, de-facto authorities in a country where really no one really wants to engage with them anymore. The international community is taking a very strong stand not to engage with these de-facto authorities. And we're talking about change. We're seeing those de-facto authorities have more, de-facto authorities in a number of countries in the last couple of years and even more recently. And so where does humanitarian diplomacy comes in when we are faced with an authority that we don't speak to as an international community? Well, in fact, as humanitarians, we speak to everyone, and we always have. And that's how we gain access. And by speaking to everyone, we speak to de-facto authorities. In fact, we speak to them a lot. And I have to say, in Afghanistan, on the 8th of September, so just a few weeks after the 15th of August, we had the ERC (Emergency Relief Coordinator), Martin Griffith, and we had Peter Moore, president of ICRC, present on the ground in Afghanistan to speak to these new authorities in the country.

And their presence has made a huge difference for our collective access. They have been able and if I speak for the ERC as OCHA, he has been able to have an agreement with the de facto authorities, multiple points that really led to the protection of humanitarians and access, unimpeded access to the communities in the country. And that's humanitarian diplomacy for you, just really concrete way forward. And to be honest, in the past two and a half years, and I was there when it happened, I actually was in the room when this was discussed, it has been the case. I'm not saying it's perfect. I'm saying we have to face daily impediments, administrative impediments.

We're faced with a movement – don't call them something else – that is very decentralized. So, this negotiation of access is happening all the way at the national level, all the way down to the district level, sometimes village level, to make sure that this assistance and this access of the people to the basic services is actually happening. And that's on a daily basis, that's not something that's done and over with once you had negotiation. You have to renegotiate and renegotiate and build those relationships. Build those relationship with you know, agreements on ways forward, and on ways of thinking that can be very different.

I find it fascinating that talking to the de facto authorities, they actually accept to talk to me, look at who I am, you know. And we can have a dialogue. We can actually sit and agree to disagree, but we can still have access. I'll stop there.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Great. Thank you, Isabel. Ambassador Ong, during your period of tenure as ASEAN Secretary General, you experienced a number of humanitarian emergencies, and there have been many since. Perhaps on reflection, what would you say are the key underappreciated components of diplomacy seen at the regional level in Southeast Asia during these periods?

**Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman, RSIS**

Well, first thing, we do a lot of things that people don't realize, but our guiding principle across ASEAN, ASEAN has ten member states, and soon we have Timor Leste as the eleventh member state. The public focus is always on other things and forgetting that Southeast Asia is actually one of the most terrible place on Earth for natural disaster. So, we try our best to keep the ball rolling whenever there is a natural disaster. And more importantly, we keep the hope alive. We know that there are many people who can't do much. Our regional body is also not very well-endowed, or even if we have money, we tend to be hoping for other people to open their wallet before we open our own wallet. So, the key thing that we do is to try to keep hope alive and quickly try to ameliorate the damage caused by whatever natural disaster. One of my colleagues in the Singapore NGO described all this action as collective compassion in motion. So, the idea is keep collective compassion in motion. And we do it by three ways. One, try to

use other people's money. Two, we try to avoid creating new institutions which will take some time to gel and become effective.

We focus on frameworks and whatever mechanism that the regional grouping of Southeast Asian country can agree on. And number three, really what we do is to innovate whatever is out there. So, I think the most important thing during my close of time as SG of ASEAN was preparing the ground for this ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. It would be a few more years after I left the Secretariat before this agreement was signed and sealed. But the idea was to look at all that we have and prepare a decent framework and agreement which will help us to keep the activities of our grouping during an emergency or disaster situation effective, or at least be seen to be there. So, we work on this framework, which is now the AADMER. The agreement is called AADMER, which led to the establishment of the ASEAN Disaster Coordination Centre, AHA Centre. So, it's something worth bearing in mind. Probably we can't do everything at the same time. We can't mobilize all our diplomatic resources to do this humanitarian work, because there are other competing demand for the ASEAN family. ASEAN family, now we are community building based on political security pillar, economic integration, and sociocultural development.

So, unless you really sit down and force a guy who can afford to give you the money to open his wallet, it's very hard. But what we do is that we look at whatever we have, try to make it better, and more importantly, in my opinion, delivering some hope and the prospect for some effective outcomes. If all of us can pull in one direction. So that basically would be the diplomacy by the ASEAN group in times of disaster, or for the purpose of managing natural disaster. And even now, man-made disaster, what you call humanitarian diplomacy must work and must be seen to be there, even though some of us are more and more convinced that it might not yield the result that we wanted. So, the other important thing is that in ASEAN region, it is a place for people to innovate, because we've got so many different type of natural disaster or emergency situation. So what ASEAN diplomacy revolve around is to make sure that when people try to do all this innovative stuff, it will actually benefit our people in different ASEAN member states and deliver some results. We don't want to give a free bus to somebody, and then after successful experimentation, they drive the bus away, leaving us at the bus station, not knowing where to go.

So, it has been quite effective, our diplomacy, in this respect. But ASEAN suffer from a very bad public image because everyone thinks that ASEAN is not very effective in dealing with political security problems and other things being unequal, and no one think it is a worthwhile enterprise. But actually, if you look through what has happened in the past, I left the Secretariat in 2008, more than 15 years ago. I think there has been good progress in terms of the framework, the mechanism, and more importantly, this idea of keeping our collective compassion in motion. We can talk a bit more about all this from the Q & A and other commentaries following my presentation. But one last point I want to make is that what is important in our work in ASEAN humanitarian diplomacy is that we must not shut out our mind to any workable ideas. It may be not very well articulated, some ideas, but if it is worth a try, let's do it. And the other important thing is that we have to work on some of this idea, because when a disaster happened in Southeast Asia, everybody would like to help out.

The first guy here on the scene will be the US Navy. Next guy will be probably the Chinese Red Cross. Or Red Cross is a new thing, maybe Chinese government will offer to help. And maybe there's other support coming from the more advanced economy in our Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region. So, what ASEAN has to do in our diplomatic response is don't shut out all these potential sources of assistance to help us. But then we must have a proper way of organising all this so that the donors or the people who are prepared to give more resources to help will feel confident and feel that their effort and their money are well -pent. So, I believe in the last 15 years or so, ASEAN as an organisation have done all that institutional framework structure. Now they are all there. It is how to deliver the goods to the people affected by all this humanitarian crises, and in the process come across as being capable of doing more. Because the way we see it, there will be more disasters, more emergency situation, given the effect of climate change and other kind of phenomena that we see in this world. So, to sum up, Alistair, I think we have been successful in synergizing the potential strength of Southeast Asian countries and our ASEAN partners, those, particularly those from the developed countries. As well as holding out the prospect of more cooperation with NGOs and other big organisation devoted to helping in the humanitarian crisis.

But now the important thing is that we have to build on this kind of good foundation or positive attributes and demonstrate that we will not waste the resources. We are quick

to be there on the ground, and on top of that, we work towards a certain outcome which is sustainable. Thank you very much.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. For the second round, we've got 4 questions, but I'm also conscious of time and making sure we have time to engage with the Q & A discussion and opening it up to everyone in the room. So please, can we just flash up the Pigeonhole QR code for those who haven't seen it already? Please enter your questions into that platform. For the second round, maybe if we just keep the answers a bit shorter so then we can move into that Q & A and have that interactive discussion that I think has been so beneficial today. So, for Guo Yang, we've heard now about some of the innovations that's happened in Southeast Asia. I'm just wondering if you can point to some important considerations. When we're thinking about the future of humanitarian diplomacy in China, what do we need to be thinking about?

**Dr Guo Yang**

Okay, thank you again. So, I think in this regard, I can give you three key words for this kind of consideration and innovation for the Chinese Red Cross. Firstly, I must say now we have quite a positive policy environment, as I've mentioned before, with the developmental economy, with this BRI initiative, and especially the notion of the so-called community of shared future for mankind. Now there are more and more Chinese enterprises that are pushing business overseas as well as the Chinese social organisations. They want to have more international presence. In this regard, the Chinese government, I mean, the Ministry of Civil Affairs even have, even have issued a plan of action to encourage the Chinese social organisations to go abroad. And now there are a little bit about 103 Chinese social organisations that have got their consultant status within the UN Economic and Social Council. So, in the future, first I foresee there'll be more Chinese social organisations involved in the policy discussions at the international level. The second keyword is the capacity building. As I've mentioned before, the so-called the humanitarian diplomacy sometimes is very often improvised, depending on the needs at any given moment and can be practiced by any staff of humanitarian organisations.

So especially for the Chinese Red Cross and we are planning to, actually we shall prepare for the humanitarian action and complex emergencies. I mean situations mixing several kinds of disasters and crisis, especially natural disaster combined with the conflicts because this is the nature of the Red Cross. So, we must pay attention to that. So, then we notice we need to enhance. This is also the lesson we learned from our activity for Syria we learned that we need to enhance our capacity in terms of situational analysis. So that reason why I very much encourage the permanent presence of our staff in the field to know the situation, to do the right assessment of the situation. This is our added value even to the government and to the military. And secondly, is the enhance our knowledge of international laws including IHL, international human rights law, refugee law. So, in this regard actually we have already engaged with the SRC and OCHA to understand the international norms. And last but not least is the risk and security management. So, in this regard this is where we really need to enhance our understandings and as well as the negotiation skills as a diplomat.

So, in this regard actually we are planning to integrate the book published by the SRC together with the UN about the frontline negotiations into our daily practice. And also, in this regard we noticed we need to engage more with, I mean for the security and the risk management, we engage more with the military and to help them understand the nature of the humanitarian organisation. But last not the least, I want to promote a principled diplomacy with the government. You know, sometimes we notice that it is not so easy for us to raise money for the international humanitarian projects. But you see, the Chinese government, they have this money, and they have this international development cooperation agency, so we want to persuade them to purchase the services of our humanitarian organisations but at that time we need to enhance their knowledge of the fundamental principles, what's the added value to them. So yes, we are part of the state, but we are not integrated part of the state foreign policies. Even though I worked for the Minister for Foreign Affairs for several years, but I don't take myself as a state diplomat, more humanitarian diplomat. So, in this regard we really need to help them understand THE added value.

I think in this regard more or less, the government has noticed it. That is the reason why they sent us to Syria instead of the state agency, the state aid teams, they send the Red Cross to Syria, they think it's much better. But in the field I noticed and it's very hard for me to persuade them to see how to manage the security, to trust the Red Cross, that

we are different from the state agencies and we have this movement network, and we have quite good analysis of the local situation. Actually, the security is not such a big concern for the Red Cross, but it's very difficult to persuade them to accept this kind of analysis because, of course, because we are in the field, they care about us very much in terms of the security issues. So, these three keywords. Thank you.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Great, thank you. And I'll turn to Jeremy now for your question about the key considerations that we should be thinking about in terms of new types of crisis drivers, their dynamics and dimensions to inform potential pathways ahead. I think I'll change my wording slightly for that.

**Mr Jeremy England**

Yeah. Okay. So, there's a few trends out there which really impact the humanitarian diplomacy environment if you like. The first is that the humanitarian sector, all of it, all of the different channels that you could dream of, whether private or philanthropic or military or government to government, or strictly principal humanitarians in the traditional sense, looking at NGOs and Red Cross and the UN, they are all overextended, and they are not covering the needs. So, we're in quite a critical moment. The humanitarian sector is crucially squeezed. There are budget cuts everywhere, there are staff being fired, there are country operations being closed down or reduced, and there are huge numbers of people in need not getting the response that they need more than any time in my career over the last 30 years. So that's the first context. So, this diplomacy is necessary. Budgets are going down; crises are going up. Humanitarians are being asked to do more and more. At the same time, they're being told that they're broken as a system. So, we have to be a little bit coherent about the reality of that environment.

In some ways, people are saying humanitarians are less and less acceptable in the field. I firmly disagree. It's always been a battle to negotiate access. It's always been about local relations, time, presence, walking your talk, delivering what you say you will, building trust in a virtuous cycle. So that's going on as normal. But a lot of it in the wider world is being questioned, and that's causing confusion then for authorities in different

locations. So that's one thing. The sector is overextended. Second thing is, there are virtually no credible authorities to advocate to. There are very few multilateral fora or regional fora which are actually fully respected by the parties who control the situation on the ground and who are effective in resolving the issues and coming to peace agreements or coming into resolutions of unstable situations. So, we're dealing increasingly with de facto authorities, a blocked security council, many other bodies at local and regional level which are just as biased as the international bodies, and then the host country who's actually dealing with the crisis, having to pick and choose who the hell they want to deal with. And I think Morocco is a recent good example where they said, we're going to take help from four countries, nobody else.

And so, we're in that kind of environment where authorities are under pressure to work out who they want to hear from, actually. The next issue consideration is the whole disputed facts situation. Misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, polarisation, exploitation of different truths for different political purposes, which are sacrificing people's trust in response channels. And we're also demanded for immediate positions on something, before anybody's even made an assessment on the ground and triangulated the information and tried something. And then a desperate reach for technical solutions which are somehow going to fix the world, whereas, in fact we know the origin of most of the problems are political and not technical. Then one last point. There's a huge underestimation of the risks that are undertaken when you launch your diplomacy, particularly public diplomacy. Narratives are twisted, manipulated. Basic norms are no longer accepted and they're questioned. We've now heard again, I have to use the current example, Israeli ministers referring to behaviour of World War II, to which we've said, Never again. They're referring to World War II as justification for what's going on now in Gaza. So international norms that we established since then are somehow no longer relevant.

So public diplomacy particularly is very easy to instrumentalise, twist and misuse. So, these are considerations when you design your diplomacy strategy for humanitarians. It's like the very first speaker, keynote speaker, said, know yourself, stay true to yourself. Be factual, be present on the ground. Stop opinionating from somewhere else in the world. If you can't be present, I contest your right to have such a strong voice in humanitarian diplomacy. Be trusted by the people you're trying to serve, seems still to be the only solution to having a credible voice amongst those considerations.



**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. And to Isabel, we often hear, and it's coming out quite clearly, about the reactive nature of humanitarian mechanisms. How do we plan ahead, given that basis for informing humanitarian leadership and diplomacy for these complexities of the future that we've been hearing about today?

**Ms. Isabelle Carlsen**

Thank you. So, are we reactive or are we adaptable? I think for me, we're not reactive. We're adaptable. This is the way we are. This is our raison d'être. We have to adapt to whatever is going to be thrown at us as humanitarians because we have to be the first one on the ground. We have to understand the context, we have to do the assessments, we have to make sure that we involve the communities that are concerned about the event that we're trying to alleviate suffering from. So, we need to do that in a very adaptable manner. And we have over the past so many years, as humanitarian, adapted to pretty much every context. I will give you two examples, but before I do, I want to say we do that within plans. Humanitarian response is not something that's coming out from one day to the next. And when we adapt, we adapt within existing plans. The humanitarian response plan that's designed every year for every country is taking into account all the trends. And let me give you an example. In Afghanistan, in the last six weeks, we've had 3 earthquakes and a massive returnee crisis at the border.

We've actually been able to integrate those responses and to deploy the necessary assistance because it was part of the plan. We had integrated when we prepared the plan for 2023, that there would be natural disasters, that those natural disasters will probably affect x thousands, hundreds of thousands people, and that we were seeing potential movement between borders increasing before the end of the year. So, we're actually responding and adapting to those crises within an existing plan. And it's question of scale, it's a question of capability, it's a question of decision making, it's very much a question of funding. And so, our plans are really related also to the ability of the international community to continue to have an interest in a specific country, a specific

context. And not to forget, as Jeremy was just saying now, that whatever context comes on the highlights, it's not necessarily the only context that will need to continue to have plans and continue to have a response. But to come back to my examples, we have been faced with a unique situation in Afghanistan where the de-facto authorities have put a ban on the employment of female staff, of Afghan female staff.

We haven't talked about gender very much since this morning, so I'll just use that opportunity to do so. It's a massive catastrophe for humanitarians. Female staff, especially in a context like Afghanistan, are essential to reach women in the communities. We can't work without female staff. We wouldn't have a principled approach. We've talked a lot about our humanitarian principles. One of our key principles is actually to reach the most vulnerable women and children. So, this is not an option. That happened on the 24th of December last year. And on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, I was talking to key donors, and I was saying to them, trust the humanitarians, they will adapt. We will find solutions. We will negotiate our way back; we will negotiate the women's way back at work. And we have, in a very, very discreet manner. Probably most of you in this room don't know that Afghan women actually are working in the humanitarian field every day. But we don't talk about it. We're protecting them and we're protecting their work. And they are part of the protection for the communities, the women in the communities. This is very quiet, but it's happening. We're adapting always. We're not reacting.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. And the last question before we open to the audience for Ambassador Ong is what are the important scenarios that we should be anticipating when we're thinking about diplomacy in humanitarian settings?

**Ambassador Ong Keng Yong**

Be realistic and avoid too much of ideological consideration. I always like to say first thing first. You have a guy who has his whole home and family swept away. And you want to talk about all those other things about men or woman, women should not be allowed to do this and that. So I know it's difficult, but I think we should not give up on stressing this point. We have a disaster in front of us. Let's get the food and water supply out before we talk about other things. How do we improve humanitarian law and

disaster relief framework, blah, blah, blah. No, it's not the time to talk about those things. So that's my response.

### **Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Okay, thank you. So, I hope everyone's been active online. I can see we've got 16 questions, so I won't choose them all. I will give the panellists the opportunity to have a look at these, all the questions afterwards, the ones that we don't get to. And I will go one by one, because I think that is the easiest way to deal with this situation. So, the first question which will come up is when national authorities systematically violate IHL and major donors have downgraded diplomatic relations, how can diplomacy go beyond seeking access towards addressing the causes of vulnerability?

### **Ambassador Ong Keng Yong**

So, this is one reiteration of the point that I made earlier. I think the important thing for us, for the bigger organisation championing work in disaster situation, or for regional body like ASEAN, we should just focus on what we need to do first. We can debate about that. But the funny thing is that at the end of the dangerous phase of a disaster relief, everybody all pack out and go, and people forget about what they've been screaming about at the beginning. And then they wait for another disaster to come, and then they start screaming again, those things. So, I think what we need to do is have some, what I call adults in the room. There are good statesmen in all our respective countries and regional organisation. Let's just get going. We can talk about violation of IHL. But if there is a need for us to bring out the water supply and giving shelter to people and don't let women being bullied and kicked around by those guys who don't think that they should be out there, we take care of these things quickly. Then, there must be a system in regional bodies. I like to say that ASEAN, much as some of us think that it hasn't been very effective in various ways, we have reached a point where we have a particular formalised manner to address some of the shortfalls in any disaster situation or to follow up on fundamental questions like what else we need to do? Are we capable of handling all this criticism about us, blah, blah, blah.

So as an institution, ASEAN or any other regional body must have the ability to go beyond being criticised and then say, okay, this is where we fall short. Let's review this and take a look and see what we can do next. There is a question in the chat about how

the AADMER came about, this ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. It was on the table for 20 years. Finally, when this huge disaster happened in the early 2000s, some official decided to put it on the table quickly and say we need to settle this and can we all agree? And then we flesh out all the details later on as we go along. At that point in time, we did not think about AHA Centre as being priority, but we got the agreement done and I think this is what is important. So, we have to always wait for a huge disaster before we can agree on a framework or a mechanism. That's very pathetic. But well, as we now say, we got the AHA Centre, we have the AADMER, let's not worry about how it came about, just make it useful and effective.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Isabel?

**Ms Isabel Carlsen**

Thank you. I will take again the example of Afghanistan. Hopefully not too boring to continue talking about this, but I think it's a really essential point because in Afghanistan we don't actually have pretty much, almost not, I shouldn't say totally not, because we have a few very important representations of diplomatic mission. We have the EU, which is incredible. We have the Japanese, we have the Turks, and we have also a number of other regional countries, Pakistan, Iran. So, we have a group of diplomats present who are doing quite a lot. But with the wider international community, I think the main key to address those causes of vulnerability is really advocacy, to them, because as humanitarian, we end up being the only point of contact and it is way beyond our realm. Way beyond our realm. And we're still doing it because we don't have a choice. So, we are the only point of contact and we're getting this unique way of being able to advocate on both sides, which is problematic because it's also impacting our positioning vis-a-vis the community and the trust we can build with other actors in countries. So, I think it is essential that in context like that, as the ambassador just said, even if we don't necessarily want to speak to those new actors on the ground, we need, as you maintain, we need everyone else to come and speak to them. And we are doing a lot of advocacy in that sense.

**Dr Guo Yang**

Okay, thank you. This is really a hard question, so I'm not planning to have an answer to this, but I just put myself in the same situation, I'll say what we will do. So, I think this kind of a scenario is very much related to the protracted armed conflicts, and especially in terms of internal armed conflicts. So always within such kind of situation, the access per se is a problem for any humanitarian organisations because we need to approach all the related stakeholders, especially non-state actors. Now, especially nowadays, the non-state actors is really fragmented. So, it's created difficulties for us. And beyond the access, I think when I was working within the SRC, maybe you can correct me a little bit, so we have some sort of approach to the mobilization. So, we can't always find somebody or some party who is influential to one of the parties. So, we need to mobilise them, to persuade them of the value of the humanitarian actions. But as for the root causes, I think this is very much related to the root causes of the conflict per se. So, in this regard, I think maybe the relative countries or international community as a whole, we need to find a political solution to the root causes of the conflict. Then the situation can become a little better.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Great, thank you. Before I turn to Jeremy, there's a specific one for him which I will bring up on our screens now. But just to say, there are a number of questions on here directed at individuals on the panel, so I'd encourage you to vote on those questions so we get a better sense of which ones are gaining the most traction in the region, given we've only got about twelve minutes left. So Jeremy, if you've got any ideas on the or responses, thoughts on the first question, but also on the question of what does humanitarian diplomacy look like with military actors in this region and what suggestions you have for it when the military plays an outsized role.

**Mr Jeremy England**

Thanks very much. So I think I'll try to combine them in both questions. One of the key issues is sequencing. So in effective diplomacy, you need to have a relationship. Once you have a relationship, you get access to each other. In the example where Isabel brought us from Afghanistan, because she has access, she can then go and have serious assessments on the ground and serious negotiations with the authorities about

a whole range of other things that were the concern of the last question. And the same is true in diplomacy with military actors within the Southeast Asian region. Regardless of whether it's about issues of conflict or instability or issues of natural disaster or other issues. It's first and foremost getting to know each other and having enough trust that we're willing to access each other's facilities, access each other's policy processes. We're going to have that dialogue. If we can have that dialogue, we can then start introducing the key subjects that we wish to discuss, that we have a mutual interest in. I'll give you an example. Maritime security is a big issue for every country who has any frontier on the South China Sea. And we recognized that 15 years ago, and we worked together with militaries in the region.

And Singapore was kind enough to host the very first conference together with the International Committee of the Red Cross, looking at the legal frameworks that apply for maritime security. So, the law of armed conflict at sea, but also the other laws that apply in terms of territoriality at sea, rescue at sea, and so on and so forth. And that was something of great interest to all of the different maritime nations, including the US and China, who joined together here in Singapore and all of the ASEAN nations with navies. And they could explore a mutual interest topic together. And we could also present humanitarian concerns in that dialogue, both from a point of view of humanitarian law and potential humanitarian consequences in the scenarios that they were managing and established the person-to-person relationships that would be necessary in the worst-case scenario of something going wrong in the region with regard to maritime security. So, we knew who to call and who we could influence at the time if something kicked off. So that was possible because Singapore provided us a relatively neutral functional environment to host it out at Changi. The nations of the region trusted the ICRC to have a sensitive conversation behind closed doors about future scenarios they were worried about, and they were preparing.

That's built on trust, that's built on long term relationships, that's built on a sequence of focused diplomacy that starts, yes, very boringly, with access and getting to know each other and finishes in a very exciting way on core issues that we're trying to move forward in terms of preparedness, from the ICRC's point of view, for any humanitarian consequences that might arise from a maritime disaster. I hope that keep it short there.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Great, thank you. We have one for Ambassador Ong and then I'm going to pick a general question and ask all the panellists then to perhaps give some concluding remarks after this question. For Ambassador Ong what ideas or suggestions do you have for Singapore and New Zealand as they take the helm of the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on HADR in 2024?

**Ambassador Ong Keng Yong**

First of all, don't come up with any new ideas. Just look at what is there and hasn't been fully implemented or hasn't been fully tried out, and then get it going. Because the old ideas that have been put on the table are not useless ideas, they have been thought through. And in the process, I think if there is some spare time, look at all the existing framework and mechanism and try to practicalise at least one thing so that this mechanism or whatever initiative or framework there will not just be in the books. So you look at it, there are plenty of things, you know. If you ask any one of our ASEAN officials, or even those of you from the NGO side, there are many things already on the table. Just pick out one or two and say, okay, these have been lying around for the past so many years, no specific example or project to bring more action to it. So, can we just look at it? And in this case, Singapore, and New Zealand, we are two very small countries. Of course, Singapore even smaller than New Zealand, but we are generally more sensible than many other people who look for grandeur and other, what do you call, legacy projects.

So, we be practical. And if we can do that, I think it will be, at least there will be a record to say that we activated this mechanism or this framework. So that's my first response. But there are plenty of new things people like to put out but right now, let's try to look at everything that is there already on the table and activate it.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Great, thank you. And this will be our last question. And also, perhaps if you don't want to answer it or if you wish to make some concluding comments, then please do. We've got about two minutes or so left. It is to what extent will geopolitical competition positively or negatively impact humanitarian responses or humanitarian work in Asia,

Southeast Asia in the next ten years? So we'll go back in the order in which we started. So I'll go to Jeremy, Guo Yang, Isabel, and then Ambassador Ong, and please say any concluding remarks and try and keep them below two minutes. Thanks, Jeremy.

**Mr Jeremy England**

It'll force us to adapt. I think we've been foreseeing global geopolitical changes for decades. We've been seeing steps and evidence of movements in different directions. We've been seeing greater regionalization of responses. That's old news in Southeast Asia. We've been seeing increasing risks of global geopolitical conflict that would change totally the demands on all of us. It's very hard to answer specifically to such a general question, but the bottom line is that the humanitarian community will simply have to continue to adapt and will have to continue its work now on the relationships and the networks and the mutual understanding that will allow us to act no matter what scenario comes in the next ten years.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Great, thanks. Guo Yang?

**Dr Guo Yang**

Thanks. Actually, I want to address this question from Nadavia. From a personal perspective, I think the humanitarian diplomacy can positively impact the geopolitical competition. Because my personal opinion tells me that, experience tells me that the humanitarian aid issues is the most easiest part for the exchanges between peoples and between states. And lastly, I must say the diplomacy is something about compromise, but we also at the same time, we need to know what we cannot compromise. I think, as some speaker said at the beginning, we shall stick to what we are. So, I think as for humanitarians, what we cannot compromise is the people. The people whose needs we cannot compromise. But also, at the last but not least, I think we shall remember that whenever diplomacy ends, conflict starts. So, we shall see more efforts to pursue a quite principled and balanced diplomacy. Thank you.



**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. Isabel?

**Ms Isabel Carlsen**

Yeah, I think just to build on what has already been said by the two speakers, I think keep people at the center of whatever we will be having to adapt on. Always remember that this is the objective of humanitarian diplomacy is to serve the people and ensure also that we are moving towards a space where those networks and relationships are more based on trust and acceptance of the fact that there will be multiple, diverse, not always considered as acceptable, but nevertheless stakeholders, and that we will need to build those relationships.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. Ambassador Ong?

**Ambassador Ong**

I think the important thing for humanitarian diplomacy or humanitarian work is to focus on three P's. Be prepared, be people-oriented and be practical. So yes, we can have another arena to talk about how great my political system is, how wonderful my geopolitical policy may be, blah, blah, blah, but not right now. There is a dam broken or a river is overflowing, and earthquake has happened. The first thing is, are we prepared? If you're not prepared, then it's no point talking about geopolitics, because we may not exist tomorrow, right? And number two, we need to rebuild the kind of deficit regarding trust and confidence of our people, vis-a-vis governance, and government. So let us take this opportunity to say, okay, let's say that we can still compete geopolitically this way or the other way. But first thing first, we need to organise a people-oriented humanitarian relief program when there is a big disaster. And last thing, be practical. Every time I read something about new humanitarian program, it involves a lot of state organs and financiers and a lot of other people. By the time we all can agree to come to a meeting, it's the end of the story already.

Then the new government will come in and say, I don't like this old government's proposal, we'll do a new one. So, let's be practical. So, whatever we do in the case of

ASEAN, we have the wonderful thing called AADMER. Let's operationalise it as much as we can and be practical in doing so. And number two, what we can do is to always ask ourselves how can we convince the people that the government of the day or the international or regional community would like to help them if they are in a big disaster or big problem caused by certain factors beyond our control? And I think if we can get the feeling that there is someone called government willing to work and prepare to help us or save us from this kind of dilemma, I think it'll be good for all of us. So, let's try to do this. I know it's very difficult because my friends in ASEAN always say I need to show some results. And some of this requires four or five years or maybe forever. But I say, hey, come on, you can try. At least I can say to myself, I die trying. Thank you.

**Dr. Alistair D. B. Cook**

Thank you. And thanks to all the panellists for their interventions this afternoon. And with that, I would like to ask you to join me, we're out of time, to thank all three panellists for their intervention.