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HADR in Southeast Asia: Unpacking the Military's Humanitarian Role

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SYNOPSIS

Recent responses to natural hazards, conflicts, and the COVID-19 pandemic have illustrated a diverse and vast network of emergency and disaster responders. Militaries are vital to this network due to their unique assets and expertise, but research on how militaries connect and interact among themselves and with other actors is limited in Southeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

DISASTERS ARE becoming increasingly intense and uncertain in our new climate reality. The growing linkages between natural and human-induced hazards in a more interconnected world are generating greater risks that can overwhelm national capacities and worsen transboundary effects. ASEAN states continue to invest in building national and regional emergency and disaster risk management (DRM) systems to adapt to this.

Despite stronger civilian coping mechanisms, militaries continue to be the primary responders of ASEAN states during crises and calamities. Defence forces are also among the first to be mobilised when governments send or receive humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). We observe this in the 2017 Marawi conflict, the 2018 Central Sulawesi tsunami, and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Centrality of Southeast Asian Militaries

The centrality of Southeast Asian militaries therefore means that efforts to improve regional crisis response and disaster governance cannot fully succeed without military cooperation. Cooperating with militaries, in policy or practice, requires an understanding of the social networks they are part of and the nature of their ties in

emergency and disaster contexts. Yet there is a shortage of studies outside of military institutions that generate such insights. Where should we begin?

What civilians generally know about militaries in emergencies and disasters are driven by two developments: technological advancements and growing acceptance of military engagement in response to natural hazards and human-induced disasters like conflicts to pandemics. Access to more powerful mobile devices and information sharing platforms make large amounts of emergency and DRM data more available to the public.

Datasets can give us a clearer picture not only of who is doing what, but also where and when they are doing it. As a result, our ways of tracking and assessing resources and activities in emergencies and disasters, including foreign military assets (FMA) like those deployed in Indonesia and the Philippines have improved.

Militaries have the equipment and skills to quickly deploy strategic airlifts like C-130s that can transport and operate in hard-to-reach and chaotic disaster contexts. Our increasing knowledge about what militaries can contribute and how they can support civilian responders and aid workers made it possible to structure practices for humanitarian civil-military coordination (CMCoord).

The Missing Pieces

Military HADR missions are becoming more common in many parts of the world, and CMCoord is gaining traction, especially in the Asia-Pacific. However, there is still a lot we do not know about military engagement in emergencies and disasters. There are three key reasons behind this: narrow data processing, misjudgments about HADR missions, and emerging security competition by proxy.

Mainstream emergency and DRM data processing strongly focus on operational tasks of traditional systems like civilian-led clusters. This eases coordination because it highlights the general needs of the response rather than individual differences of those providing aid. Yet it provides inadequate information on other actors such as the military that work independently of, alongside, or with such systems.

HADR activities can assist in saving lives and alleviating suffering. It can also enhance confidence-building and interoperability between militaries. But it is essentially a military mission driven by other factors like defence capabilities, domestic politics, and foreign policy.

HADR enables assisting states to show good governance, flex military might, and project technological superiority that allow rivalries to play out. The military-political-security dimensions of HADR make it challenging for militaries to share information deemed sensitive.

Linking the Parts, Revealing the Whole

Militaries are vital to emergency and DRM activities in Southeast Asia. So how can the public increase its oversight and understanding of HADR missions to improve its governance for the benefit of affected communities? One way to address this research

gap affecting policy and practice is to assess military HADR networks and see how they shape and influence regional aid and responses.

To contribute to this end, RSIS' HADR Programme launched a Database Project that explores the web of relations that link together militaries involved in HADR in Southeast Asia. Using opensource data and network analysis, it examines the social structures and nature of individual ties to gain insight into HADR governance.

ASEAN states have many differences but there is consensus that they can accomplish more together than they can apart. So far, they have remained committed to developing institutions and strategies for a more secure and stable region.

This includes the alignment of different mechanisms and tools to facilitate joint HADR missions like the ASEAN Regional Forum, Regional Standby Arrangements (SASOP), Regional Emergency Response Simulation Exercise (ARDEX), and Exercise Coordinated Response (ExCOORES), to name a few.

One ASEAN One Response?

ASEAN's progress in emergency and DRM have led to a grander "One ASEAN One Response" (OAOR) vision to move towards faster and collective responses to disasters inside and outside the region. The HADR Database Project aims to investigate who the key actors are in the HADR network, how they are connected, and what patterns emerge from their interactions like the supply or transfer of assets used for HADR, and coordination and hosting of HADR exercises.

Studying these activities can show the points of convergence or divergence that support or constrain the efficient use of available HADR resources besides regional standby arrangements. It also presents alternative pathways for achieving shared HADR objectives beyond existing cooperation platforms.

We cannot completely harness the individual and collective strengths of different sectors and stakeholders in ASEAN unless we have a better understanding of their resources, expertise, and capabilities first. The HADR Database Project begins this effort by studying the ways militaries are interconnecting among themselves and other actors in the HADR network.

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