COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Natural Disasters and Humanitarian Assistance to 2020: Relief and Recovery on a Global Scale

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A wide range of forecasts suggests that trends in population growth and urbanization, water scarcity, climate change, and other factors are increasing the vulnerability of large populations to storms, droughts, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and pandemics. Meanwhile, both governments that have financed comprehensive disaster relief efforts, and their private nongovernmental organization counterparts, are facing an era of contracting budgets. As part of the Making Multilateralism Work series, the International Institutions and Global Governance (IIGG) program sponsored a workshop on April 12, 2012, in Washington, DC, to gather experts on international cooperation and disaster relief from the U.S. State Department, Defense Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. intelligence community, the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and academia. What follows is a summary of the discussion, which was conducted on a not-for-attribution basis.

Assessing the Threat: Natural Disasters and Global Vulnerabilities

The first step in disaster-preparedness is understanding the nature of the threat. Analysts usually break down the threat by calculating the probability that a *hazard*, or naturally occurring event, would strike a given area, and then assessing the level of *risk,* or the consequences of the disaster for people living in that area. Different types of disasters require distinct methods of prediction, which in turn shape possibilities for and the nature of disaster preparedness and response. Floods and droughts, for example, have specific early precursors, and experts can predict with some advanced notice where they will occur. The incidence of earthquakes is harder to predict, at least when it comes to timing, but

geologists can identify zones where they are likely to occur. Anticipating pandemics poses unique challenges, though the U.S. government is devoting more attention to their origin and how they might progress.

In determining the risk to humans, either before or after the disaster, important questions include: What populations are at risk? What is the resilience of local communities? What is the prospect of instability or conflict in the aftermath of a disaster? What is the capacity of the government, both national and local, to respond (i.e. what is the resilience of its power generation, infrastructure, and most importantly medical systems)? What is the willingness of the local government to respond to offers of, or appeal for, outside assistance? Are there insurgents, criminals, or other illicit actors that might hinder the capacity of outside assistance groups to deliver aid?

In general, natural disasters that strike in less developed countries with poor infrastructure will generate higher numbers of deaths or injuries, more displaced people, and greater social disruption. However, the developed world also remains at risk, and more so than many people generally believe. The tropical storm *Katrina* in the United States, and the tsunami and earthquake that struck Japan in 2010 served as wakeup calls in this regard. The complex infrastructure of developed countries is often extremely fragile, and may be vulnerable to natural disasters we don't fully comprehend, such as magnetic storms generated by solar flares. One study, for example, concluded that a massive solar storm on the scale of the Carrington Event of 1859 would knock out the U.S. power grid from Canada to Georgia, and from the east coast to the Mississippi for as long as sixteen months, and incite societal panic.

In addition, the world is experiencing extremely rapid rates of urbanization. By 2050, the proportion of people living in cities will rise from just over 50 percent today to two-thirds—the equivalent of adding one city the size of Germany every year. Most of this urban growth will occur in coastal areas, including many that are prone to disasters like tropical storms or flooding—increasing human exposure to natural disasters. Much of this urbanization is not being accompanied by the necessary infrastructure, reducing resilience in the face of disaster. Sprawling slums—in which more than two billion people will live by 2030 will be acutely vulnerable. Furthermore, urban areas are often at a greater risk for political or social instability. With people crowded together in urban centers, riots, political protest, and even rebellion can be triggered by a government's inadequate response to a disaster. Further complicating the issue, many aid organizations are built to provide relief in rural areas, and are struggling to realign their strategy to address urban disasters.

Moreover, in a globalized world, the contributing factors to a disaster, as well as the consequences, are more intricate and far-reaching. Shocks in one place can now resonate around the world, as demonstrated by the 2007-2008 global food crisis, which was caused (PDF) by spiking oil prices, droughts, and government policies with unforeseen consequences. Another prime example was the eruption of the Icelandic volcano in April 2010 that disrupted global trade and caused problems ranging from severe economic losses in Kenya to challenges for the U.S. military operations in

Afghanistan and Iraq. Finally, the so-called "CNN effect" transports images of suffering across the world, increasing peoples' demand to respond to natural disasters that may not directly affect them. The increasing penetration of social media has only increased levels of awareness of the suffering of strangers.

Local Resilience and International Response

Cities and countries exhibit wide variations in their capacity to assess the risks of natural disasters and avoid their worst consequences. The 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic demonstrated a common trend: studies were conducted on every continent, and the strategic and tactical responses were adequate throughout the world, but many things failed at the local level—leading to higher morbidity and mortality rates than might have been the case otherwise.

Still, some efforts to build local capacity are promising and could be replicated. Australia, for instance, is one of the developed countries most at risk to disasters, but they have launched a mission to establish "prepared communities" that anticipate threat levels and assess local resilience, and then feed these conclusions to higher levels of government and request appropriate resources. The initiative has enormous potential, since local officials and analysts understand the threat far better than their distant high-level partners. This contrasts with certain bureaucratic missteps that often occur when decisions are being made at higher levels by officials who don't really understand the threat on the ground or what resources are needed. Similarly, after a major typhoon struck Taiwan in 1996, the country established a project to train neighborhood citizens to learn how to perform emergency rescue, such as by using hydraulic rescue tools (commonly referred to as the "jaws of life"). A final example comes from Pakistan, where the training and funding of provincial disaster authorities was stepped up after the massive 2010 floods inundated vast portions of that country.

On the other hand, certain aspects of disaster-risk reduction and response require global, centralized coordination. For example, in response to the SARS outbreak, nations agreed to new, more robust, International Health Regulations, which lay out procedures, including one to allow the director of the World Health Organization to designate a "public health emergency of international concern," which is crucial for catalyzing a global response. The United Nations can provide vital help by enabling networks and understanding the overlap of certain disaster risk reduction measures, and how to help ensure their complementarity. Going forward, the UN should develop its resources and technical capacity to provide advisory services to nations in crisis after a disaster. Japan, for instance, was overwhelmed by aid donations after the tsunami and earthquake, and needed outside assistance to help ensure its coherence and coordinate its delivery.

Regional organizations are also increasingly acting as a conduit for disaster assistance. The Organization of American States, for example, is pressing member states to prioritize disaster response and provided important support for international actors in Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake in that country. However, regional bodies can also, if they choose, act as a shield in keeping

international assistance organizations out of disaster-stricken areas. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the Economic Community of West African States, were singled out for sometimes working to cut the United Nations and other actors out of disaster response efforts.

In part, the growing participation of regional organizations reflects undeniable geopolitical shifts, which also are impacting the donor landscape in important ways. Given the crisis in the eurozone and the general trend toward austerity, European donors may continue to decrease their overseas assistance, including disaster aid. The future magnitude of U.S. funding for disaster assistance is also uncertain. One participant noted that humanitarian assistance has traditionally enjoyed bipartisan support and robust funding from Congress, in part due to evangelical support for helping disaster victims; indeed, the Senate would often add extra funding beyond the president's request. But in the summer of 2011, the U.S. Senate surprised aid organizations by refusing to fund disaster relief after Hurricane Irene swept up the east coast of the United States. This domestic decision may portend cutbacks at the international level.

At the same time, rising powers are expected to become more involved, but they are not homogenous, and questions remain about which of them will step up to the plate. For its part, Brazil moved into the ranks of the top ten donors to the World Food Program last year. Some nations, like Turkey, India, and to some extent China, resist being labeled "donors", not wanting to raise expectations. Aid organizations have also criticized emerging aid donors for making the same mistakes that Western NGOs learned from thirty years ago—and which result in the waste of scarce resources, such as food being dumped out of trucks in Somalia because it cannot be delivered to those in need. China and Russia have expressed their view that the current aid system is "broken" and they are not interested in supporting it. China and India, however, suffer from high exposure to natural disasters, and thus may participate more in global disaster risk reduction and response efforts. In short, the extent and impact of contributions from rising powers remains to be seen.

The Role of the United States

Over the last decade, the U.S. Congress provided more than $33 billion for "foreign disaster assistance" by civilian agencies—mainly through the U.S. Agency for International Development's office of foreign disaster assistance (OFDA) and the State Department's bureau of population, refugees and migration (PRM). The Department of Defense also spent an estimated $1.5 billion for relief assistance over the same period. These figures do not include the hundreds of millions of dollars provided by the U.S. government annually to fund United Nations agencies engaged in various aspects of "relief and rehabilitation."

Defining the content of U.S. national interests is a matter of policy to be determined by each administration. The U.S. intelligence community can help inform U.S. administrations, however, by providing regular assessments of the risk of disaster and its likely consequences. This can help U.S. officials prioritize risks—by asking if a failure to properly address the disaster would cause a

degradation of U.S. geopolitical power, hurt U.S. military or economic interests, create instability in a region that is important to the United States, or risk social instability within the United States itself (e.g. Katrina).

Meeting participants noted that the United States has the world's most extensive system for publicizing threat assessments and modeling risk based on population, infrastructure resilience, and the hazard exposure. Releasing these threat assessments can help garner support for the necessary public expenditures to reduce vulnerability, can motivate residents to demand their local government develop appropriate response plans as well as take actions to reduce vulnerability, and finally, can incentivize private companies and citizens to take appropriate measures in their own businesses or homes. While other countries also conduct similar risk assessments, these are not always publicized, negating much of their potential impact. In fact, one Indian threat assessment that was released was quickly retracted as "confidential." Diplomatically, the United States should press its allies to be forthcoming about hazard profiles.

The U.S. military has played a major role in disaster response in recent years—from the 2010 Haitian earthquake to the 2011 Japanese tsunami. A 2005 Pentagon directive (Directive 3000.05) elevated support of stability, transition, and reconstruction operations to the level of combat operations in DoD doctrine. Although focused primarily on post-conflict operations, this doctrinal shift has improved military disaster response capacities significantly. The U.S. military also continues to conduct significant operations targeted specifically at disaster response, as in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami and the floods in Pakistan. The United States military brings some inherent advantages to disaster risk reduction and response. To begin with, the military is globally engaged, and primed to transport people and supplies—both of which are needed for disaster response. Second, the organization has excellent mobile communications equipment—which are vital if disasters have destroyed internet and phone systems. Third, it is self-sustaining in the field and can defend itself if disasters occur in conflict zones. And finally, it is well-connected with the U.S. intelligence community, which can provide critical and prompt situational awareness. (For example, satellite photographs that demonstrate the scope and character of the situation before and after a disaster.)

However, the Department of Defense has yet to formalize education for disaster support for military officers or enlisted personnel. In addition, no robust programs exist to teach members of the military how to cooperate with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—a critical gap since NGOs are already on the ground when disasters strike and possess important knowledge of local realities, cultures, and languages. It is especially important to improve processes of cooperation because local populations are often intimidated by, or antagonistic towards, the U.S. military, and far more likely to trust development agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

At the same time, there is a real need to recalibrate the U.S. disaster relief strategy to be less dependent on the military. In a survey of twenty-two countries of disaster prone nations, governments attested that they don't want boots on the ground, but they do believe they would benefit from innovations and

consultations on their own threat assessments and response plans. At the same time, reducing the vulnerability of an area is inextricably linked to development. Properly safeguarding housing, infrastructure, and communications systems so that a disaster does not destroy them is typically less expensive than rebuilding after a disaster strikes. However, the military has four times as much funding for disaster reduction than the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Conclusion

No nation state is immune from disasters, and in a globalized era, disasters that strike one country can affect people across the world. The United States has neither the capacity, nor the desire, to respond to all disasters around the world, and should instead use its leverage to catalyze a more global recognition of the threat and the need to reduce vulnerability—and prepare for disaster response.