

Webinar: Paper Launch: Neighbourhood First Responder: India's Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief

December 2020

- On 8th December, 2020, the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) organized a webinar to discuss the policy brief authored by CSEP Research Analyst **Saneet Chakradeo** titled “Neighbourhood First Responder: India's Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief.”
- The event commenced with introductory remarks from **Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, CSEP, who was also the session's moderator.
- The panellists for the event included **Arjun Katoch**, Member of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA); **Capt Sarabjeet Singh Parmar**, Executive Director of the National Maritime Foundation; **Akriti Vasudeva**, Stimson Centre; and **Saneet Chakradeo**.

The [policy brief](#) is premised upon India's intent of becoming a “first responder” in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) to its immediate neighbours, which puts on it the onus to act first at times of crisis. Driven by primary research, the paper studies India's ability to do so by analysing two decades worth of HADR operations in the South Asian region. It also chalks out worst-case scenarios for the future and makes recommendations on how India can improve its operational capabilities in the neighbourhood.

Political ambition and neighbourhood first

All speakers agreed that India's HADR action needs to be conceptualised within its larger foreign policy framework and any relief operation's political context. Akriti Vasudeva spoke about how India's HADR efforts demonstrate its growing regional and global leadership role, so disaster relief is considered a priority in its neighbourhood strategy. Capt Parmar also asserted that HADR comes under what the Navy terms as a “benign role” and that India is considered a “preferred security provider” among its neighbours because it respects the sovereignty of the affected nations. He illustrated this with the example of Cyclone Nargis, in 2008, where, unlike the United States and other Western powers, India was one of the first responders allowed to assist Myanmar.

Internal processes and coordination

An important point highlighted in the policy brief relates to the lacuna in cooperation between various inter-governmental departments and agencies that hinder India's HADR capabilities. The paper forwards suggestions on how cooperation can be improved, for example, by centralising decision-making under the National Security Advisor (NSA). While recognising the coordination deficit, however, Mr. Katoch argued against such a move since disaster relief initiatives are a “political act”: given diplomatic sensitivities, the MEA should be at the forefront of such operations. He suggested that there needs to be a permanent organisation that “institutionalises domain knowledge and keeps it.” He also noted that when India has the political will, it can act quickly, citing the example of India's operations after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, where rescue teams reached within six hours. This idea of reforming rather than revamping India's response system was also supported by Capt Parmar, who echoed the importance of strengthening existing procedures and streamlining standard operating procedures (SOPs).

The role of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)

Capt Parmar highlighted the Indian Ocean Region's vulnerability to disasters and the utility of roping in the

Quadrilateral security dialogue (India, Australia, Japan, and the United States) and other extra-regional countries for relief efforts. Akriti Vasudeva also made a case for the Quad, emphasising that disaster relief is a “low hanging fruit” and is routinely brought up in speeches by Quad country officials as an area of cooperation because of the strong bilateral relations of its members. Focussing on India, she spoke about the benefits of taking a proactive role in cooperating with other regional powers for “burden-sharing” on the transfer of equipment, tools, and data and the sharing of successful experiences and strategies, training, and exercises. A substantive part of the discussion also questioned whether India needed to reinvent the wheel of disaster response regionally when it could adapt existing processes of relief and humanitarian crisis response developed under the United Nation’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

An important recent example to understand India’s HADR actions in the neighbourhood and abroad is its role in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Vasudeva spoke of how India’s neighbourhood diplomacy involved providing medical supplies and assistance to Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius. India also proposed the COVID emergency fund and information-sharing website under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). She also highlighted how, through the Quad and other Indo-Pacific regional groupings, India is going beyond the neighbourhood and taking on a more global role in responding to the pandemic. Noting that India has one of the largest capacities to produce COVID-19 vaccines, Arjun Katoch observed that India would probably reach out to assist its neighbours first to ensure distribution in South Asia.



(From L to R): Saneet Chakradeo, Research Analyst, Foreign Policy and Security, CSEP; Akriti Vasudeva, Stimson Centre; Col. Arjun Katoch, Member of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA); Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security, CSEP; Capt Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, Executive Director of the National Maritime Foundation; Rakesh Mohan, President & Distinguished Fellow, CSEP.

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