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## Japan's Climate Security Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

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Maritime Self-Defense Force Rear Adm. Ohban Hideyuki at a briefing at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, for a multinational HADR exercise during the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise, 2018. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

### SYNOPSIS

*Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) are among the world's most experienced in disaster relief operations. But having to deal with the increasing frequency of extreme weather events in Japan has taken a toll on the SDF's core capabilities and limits their capacity to provide disaster relief overseas. As the climate insecurity of*

*small island states and developing countries in the Indo-Pacific increases, Japan needs to support efforts to build the capacity of their militaries for disaster relief.*

## **COMMENTARY**

Small island states and developing countries in the Indo-Pacific region are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events, which have the potential to cause population displacement and generate regional instability. As the occurrence of such events becomes more frequent, the demand for short-term aid to these countries in the form of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations will increase. Japan's ability to provide HADR assistance is limited as Japan itself is subject to increasing extreme weather events and Japan's Self-Defense Forces have had to focus on the domestic impacts of these disasters. A longer-term solution for the SDF would be to work with other major players in the region as well as outside powers to help improve the disaster response capabilities of local militaries in the Indo-Pacific region – although this effort would not be without its own challenges.

### **Extreme Weather Events and Armed Forces**

For much of the Cold War period, the SDF emphasised disaster relief operations to mitigate the anti-military sentiments of the post-World War II public. Since Japan is geographically located in the path of typhoons and in an area prone to earthquakes, the SDF have accumulated considerable experience in disaster relief operations in such conditions. (Global warming also causes wildfires and droughts but Japan's exposure is low and the SDF do not have much experience in dealing with them.) Indeed, the SDF are some of the most experienced disaster relief forces in the world and they have a significant advantage in helping to improve the HADR capabilities of the armed forces in the Indo-Pacific region.

The SDF have so far dispatched international HADR units on three occasions to assist with damage caused by extreme weather. The first HADR mission was to hurricane-stricken Honduras in November 1998 and consisted of 200 medical and air transport personnel. The second was in August 2010, when floods occurred in Pakistan. The third and largest mission (1,200 personnel) was organised in November 2013 in response to the typhoon that hit the Philippines. Despite the small number of HADR deployments thus far, the SDF's assistance has been welcomed by the recipients of their three missions.

However, with typhoons, torrential rains, heavy snowfall and other extreme weather events having become more frequent in Japan in recent years, it has become difficult for the SDF to provide adequate support to other countries as they have had to focus on disasters at home. Furthermore, because of repeated disaster relief operations, the SDF have had to postpone or cancel a number of training programmes and exercises required to maintain their operational capability. The SDF have 230,000 active-duty personnel but have recently carried out approximately 500 domestic disaster relief operations each year, with the total number of personnel deployed exceeding 1 million per year. With geopolitical tensions rising around Japan, the toll that disaster relief operations take on the SDF's operational capability is seen as a serious matter by the SDF headquarters.

## **HADR Capacity Building Assistance**

The increase in extreme weather events stems from global warming, which requires global action and global cooperation. It is becoming increasingly untenable for major countries like Japan to be the only ones to undertake HADR operations. In order to address the need for more HADR operations, a better solution would be to improve the HADR capabilities of the armed forces of small and developing countries.

But one problem in this regard is that supporting capacity building for foreign armed forces often ends in failure: armed forces are moulded in the tradition and history of a country, and it is not easy for a local force to replicate the doctrines or operational philosophies of another country's armed forces, even if they are superior. Although not focused on capacity building for disaster response, a recent case in point is the failure of the US-backed Afghan army to function adequately, resulting in its swift defeat by the Taliban. In addition, taxpayers in donor countries may not support the provision of long-term assistance that is unlikely to succeed.

Nevertheless, since 2012, the SDF have provided capacity building assistance, including in the area of HADR, to militaries in Asian countries such as Mongolia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste. These assistance efforts included multilateral projects that were carried out jointly with the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom.

The problem with supporting HADR capacity building is that the militaries of HADR recipient countries in the Indo-Pacific region do not necessarily give high priority to HADR capacity building, as their primary concern is domestic security.

Another problem is the uniqueness of Japan's command structure in HADR operations. Under the Japanese legal system, local governments at the prefectural level have the primary responsibility for HADR activities. The SDF, police, fire brigades, medical support teams and other units are organised under the command of the prefectural governor, who is familiar with the local situation. Such delegation of authority to local civilian authorities is not common in countries in the Indo-Pacific region notwithstanding the fact that such authorities are closer to the ground and have the local knowledge that militaries lack. In most countries in the region, the military is usually placed above the local government, and Japanese-style HADR command-and-control structures do not always work.

## **Japan's Strategy**

From a climate security perspective, both the short-term approach of providing direct HADR and the longer-term approach of building local HADR capacity are required to reduce climate vulnerability in the Indo-Pacific region. Although Japan's HADR capacity building assistance is currently limited due to Covid-19, it should be resumed as soon as the pandemic is under control.

The SDF are now suffering from HADR fatigue, so greater civil-military cooperation may be one solution for the future. China uses hospital ships with approximately 300 beds each for its HADR operations, which serve as a tool of military diplomacy. Hospital ships appear to be effective in assisting island nations that are facing increasing damage from disasters due to rising sea levels. In Japan, the introduction

of hospital ships with capacity for 150–500 beds was discussed just after the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011. However, it was concluded that in the event of a major disaster, the priority should be to restore and support the local medical system; building and maintaining a large hospital ship that could only be deployed in the event of a relief mission would not be an effective use of resources. Instead, the SDF have built flat-tops and supply vessels with a limited medical capacity of 30–50 beds each.

The effectiveness of capacity building is limited for the reasons mentioned above. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate its impact in being able to educate militaries in the Indo-Pacific on global warming. For better or worse, the military is in a leading position in the Indo-Pacific countries, and educating the military could help raise awareness of global warming in the country as a whole. Japan, the United States, Australia and India have agreed to strengthen the four-nation “Quad” initiative to counter the Chinese threat in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad framework will be useful not only for military operations in the region but also for HADR capacity building assistance.

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