

Staying First to Fight

Reaffirming the Marine Corps' Role in Foreign Humanitarian Assistance Missions

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Abstract: The U.S. Marine Corps' 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance* placed a dominant focus on modernizing the force to contest China within the Indo-Pacific region but deemphasized support to foreign humanitarian assistance missions. This article challenges the current framing of the Marine Corps' role in disaster response missions, specifically the notion that they are not a part of the organization's identity and that they detract from warfighting readiness. The case is made that U.S. military support to foreign humanitarian assistance missions will only grow, that the Marine Corps has and will have a role to play in these missions, and that participation in disaster relief operations improves their warfighting readiness.

Keywords: foreign humanitarian assistance, humanitarian aid, disaster relief, Marine Corps operations, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, *Force Design 2030*

The 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps' 2019 guidance shifted the strategic vision and future of the Marine Corps from a globally oriented, full range of military operations force, to an Indo-Pacific focused, naval expeditionary force optimized for conventional conflict.¹ Much of the scrutiny and support of the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* has focused on the wisdom of high-profile manpower and equipment changes and the dominant focus on China, but largely absent from the discussion is an analysis of the Marine

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Corps' envisioned role in foreign humanitarian assistance missions within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.² This article addresses that gap by examining how the guidance frames the Marine Corps' ability to respond to natural disasters as a trade-off that comes at the expense of warfighting readiness. Under the sub-heading of "warfighting," the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* states that

While we stand by to perform "such other duties as the President may direct," *foreign humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and noncombatant evacuations do not define us—they are not our identity*. Rather, they are the day-to-day consequence of being the force-in-readiness. As the force-in-readiness, *we are not an across-the-ROMO [range of military operations] force*; but rather, a force that ensures the prevention of major conflict and deters the escalation of conflict within the ROMO.³

The goal of achieving "warfighting overmatch" within the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command is not only framed in opposition to the requirement to respond to natural disasters, but these humanitarian missions are dissociated from the identity of the Marine Corps.⁴ The shift away from supporting foreign humanitarian assistance missions is a dramatic, if underappreciated, facet of the Corps' *Force Design 2030* efforts.

This article challenges current Marine Corps guidance that foreign humanitarian assistance missions are not part of Marines' identity and the implicit messaging that they detract from warfighting readiness. The scope is limited to missions within U.S.-Indo Pacific Command, given the preeminent focus of this theater in both national- and Service-level planning directives. To make this argument, existing Department of Defense (DOD) authorities for foreign humanitarian operations are first summarized, in addition to component- and theater-level guidance.⁵ U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's unique requirements for disaster relief operations are then outlined, followed by three disaster relief case studies: Operation Tomodachi (Japan, 2011), Operation Damayan (Philippines, 2013), and Operation Sahayogi Saat (Nepal, 2015). The case study analysis reinforces the argument that the Marine Corps' participation in foreign humanitarian assistance missions *is* a part of its organizational identity and supports warfighting; criticisms of this claim are subsequently addressed. The desired end state is that foreign humanitarian assistance operations should be reaffirmed as an element of the Marine Corps' identity in future Corps planning guidance updates and reframed as relevant missions that support warfighting at a level below the threshold of armed conflict.

DOD Processes for Humanitarian Assistance and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Considerations

The legal rationale for the DOD to execute disaster relief operations is complex but codified. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 provides the statutory authority for U.S. government agencies to provide foreign assistance, such as the

donations of foodstuffs on an emergency basis after a natural disaster.⁶ *DOD Directive 5100.46, Foreign Disaster Relief (FDR)* goes one step further and clarifies DOD policy with respect to responding to foreign disasters, including the mandate to act as a supporting effort to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and to act at the direction of the president or at the request of another federal department or agency.⁷ In time-sensitive emergencies, this directive allows military commanders to take prompt action to save lives in the event of an overseas disaster: a combatant commander can initiate relief operations for up to 72 hours during a crisis as long as host nation concurrence and U.S. chief of mission authority are granted. Doctrinally, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, Joint Publication 3-29, outlines guidance and principles for the military to plan, execute, and assess foreign humanitarian assistance operations.⁸ The DOD is thus not the lead for overseas disaster relief operations, but it has established legal and policy guidelines to support them.

Theater- and component-level guidance documents reaffirm the expeditionary nature and warfighting relevance of the U.S. military's support to foreign humanitarian operations. Unlike other combatant commands, environmental disasters are significant enough within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command that there is an entire organization devoted to coordinating DOD emergency responses, the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance. The center's dominant role in coordinating disaster relief operations was confirmed by the combatant commander, who declared that it was a key element of their global engagement strategy in the region, including coordination with allies' and partners' militaries.⁹ The Marine Corps' doctrinal publications state that overseas humanitarian assistance constitute a military expeditionary operation and that Marines are unique among the Services for being organized, equipped, and trained to accomplish this mission.¹⁰ The previously stated laws, directives, and guidance documents demonstrate that Marines have well-established legal, doctrinal, and technical capabilities to support foreign humanitarian assistance missions.

The Marine Corps' disaster relief capabilities would seem fortuitous, since the need to respond to natural disasters in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command is growing, not decreasing. American defense and intelligence agencies all assess that globalization, urbanization, and climate change will pose complex challenges within the Indo-Pacific region and that mega disasters (super typhoons, great earthquakes, etc.) will increase in frequency.¹¹ Other studies note that, due to global climate changes and shifting demographics, Asia-Pacific populations are more likely to be impacted by natural disasters through death, displacement, and economic losses than other regions of the world.¹² Since the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* designated the III Marine Expeditionary Force (mostly forward deployed within Japan) as its main effort, Marines in this theater will bear the brunt of responding to these natural disasters, regardless of whether they are designated as "an across-the-ROMO force."¹³ Given the criticality of the foreign humanitarian assistance mission set to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command,

the Marine Corps' doctrinal emphasis on supporting overseas humanitarian assistance missions, and the increasing likelihood of environmental disasters that necessitate relief, one would expect a correspondingly large amount of detail on the Marine's role in supporting that mission as part of its larger planning efforts.

Unfortunately, subsequent updates and refinements to the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* confirm the Marine Corps' organizational efforts to shift away from supporting overseas humanitarian operations. The *Force Design 2030* report simply restated the planning guidance comments that humanitarian assistance missions do not define the Marine Corps' identity and that they are of ancillary importance to warfighting.¹⁴ The following year's annual update to *Force Design 2030* did not mention humanitarian assistance operations at all.¹⁵ In one of the Marine Corps' newest doctrinal publications, the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* (TM EABO), the only reference to disaster relief is a pro forma acknowledgment that both the new Marine Littoral Regiments and current Marine Expeditionary Units should consider "Coordinate Foreign Humanitarian Assistance" as a task.¹⁶ While many of the changes in organization and structure for the Marine Corps are positive and reflect needed reforms to match burgeoning Chinese influence in the Pacific, the omission of detailed planning for major disaster operations is a significant shortfall. Foreign humanitarian assistance missions are relevant to warfighting and will become more, not less, frequent within the Indo-Pacific region. An examination of the Marine Corps' role in three major humanitarian aid missions over the past decade demonstrate the importance of these missions to Marine Expeditionary Forces, both in the past and for the future.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Foreign Humanitarian Assistance Case Studies

Operation Tomodachi—Japan, 2011

On 11 March 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck off the eastern coast of Japan, with an epicenter approximately 80 miles east of the major city of Sendai.¹⁷ This was the largest magnitude ever recorded in Japan and the world's third largest since 1900.¹⁸ The massive, resultant tsunami—with a maximum wave height well above 100 feet—slammed into Japan's mainland and wreaked massive devastation. Estimates vary, but at least 15,550 people died, more than 130,000 were displaced, and at least 332,395 buildings were destroyed.¹⁹ The damage and subsequent radiation releases of four of six nuclear reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant exacerbated what was Japan's worst natural disaster since 1923.²⁰

The U.S. and Japanese response to this disaster was swift and largely effective, in large part because most of the III Marine Expeditionary Force is based in Japan and could quickly respond. The U.S. Pacific Command initiated Operation Tomodachi ("friend[s]" in Japanese) and designated U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) as the operational lead, with 7th Fleet, Fifth Air Force, U.S. Army

Forces Japan, and Marine Forces Japan in support.²¹ At its peak, the military footprint was nearly 24,000 personnel, 189 aircraft, and 24 Navy vessels, including the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit.²² The Marine Corps' played a key role in this operation: within 48 hours, the "Dragons" of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 265 arrived in Atsugi, Japan, with eight helicopters that continuously ran supply missions to survivors.²³ The 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit immediately canceled a port visit and planned exercises in Indonesia and shifted to relief operations; by 25 March, they and the larger Essex Amphibious Ready Group had distributed more than 50,000 pounds of relief supplies to the Japanese.²⁴ Particularly noteworthy among this effort were the 15,000 pounds of relief supplies provided to the isolated inhabitants of Oshima Island (Miyagi Prefecture), hundreds of whom had been displaced and without utilities for nearly two weeks.²⁵ Marines from the 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade comprised the core of the Joint force land component that provided aid during relief operations and were even supplemented by a chemical, biological, radioactive, nuclear (CBRN) response detachment that was mobilized because of the radiation leaks in Fukushima.²⁶ Though friction points arose from an initial lack of a common computer network linking the USFJ with their Japanese counterparts and over-classification impeding information sharing, these challenges did not derail the larger relief effort.²⁷ Indeed, the swiftness and effectiveness of the Marine Corps' role in supporting disaster relief operations was such that Brigadier General Craig Q. Timberlake would later state that "[Operation Tomodachi] has cemented our relationship . . . with the Japanese. It's helped to change the political scene here, the political environment."²⁸

The positive impact on U.S.-Japanese relations and the historical significance of the Marines' contribution to Operation Tomodachi cannot be understated. For the first time, many Japanese people could see visible benefits of their alliance with the United States, as their self-defense forces executed a large-scale Joint relief operation with the U.S. military.²⁹ In the weeks after the earthquake, the U.S. favorability rating surged from 66 to 85 percent, reflecting the public's overall approval of the relief efforts.³⁰ The positive national polling in Japan helped offset longstanding grievances and more negative views of the U.S. military by the citizens of Okinawa, for whom the disproportionately large presence of Marines and the controversial Marine Corps Air Station Futenma are ongoing sources of friction.³¹ At the national level, USAID and the Department of State used this positive momentum to launch a joint, public-private Partnership for Reconstruction, endorsed by then-Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton and Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., improving U.S.-Japanese relations.³² The goodwill remained even a decade later, when senior members of the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force commemorated the Marines' deployment of CBRN forces and relief operations on Oshima Island.³³ The Marines' relief operations in Japan were noteworthy enough that memorabilia and artifacts from the response forces have been enshrined within the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia. Operation Tomodachi not only

strengthened the U.S.-Japanese military and diplomatic relationship, but it also indelibly defined the Marine forces who participated in it.

Operation Damayan—Philippines, 2013

Super Typhoon Haiyan made landfall in the central Visayan Islands in the Philippines on 8 November 2013, displacing 4.1 million people and killing more than 6,000.³⁴ With sustained wind speeds of more than 150 miles per hour, it was the strongest storm of 2013 and one of the most powerful typhoons of recorded history. As it approached the island of Leyte, the powerful winds pushed a 13-foot storm surge inland, wreaking havoc in the inland city of Tacloban.³⁵

As with Operation Tomodachi, the timely request and forward-deployed presence of U.S. Marines saved lives. A formal request for support from the Philippine government was issued to the U.S. government on 9 November and, under the aegis of Operation Damayan (“to help each other”), a U.S. command operations center was established at Manila’s Villamor Air Base, collocated with the headquarters for the Philippine Air Force.³⁶ U.S. Pacific Command assigned Marine Corps Forces Pacific to be the lead for coordinating military relief operations, and 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade was again called to action, with its commander designated as the tactical mission lead.³⁷ By 10 November, the commanding general and a small number of other key staff were already deployed to the Philippines and deconflicting relief operations with the the Philippine armed forces and USAID.³⁸ The timely, decisive deployment of U.S. Marines ensured that when the Philippines’ president Benigno Simeon Cojuangco Aquino III declared a state of national calamity on 11 November, the first USAID humanitarian relief supplies were already arriving at Tacloban.³⁹ U.S. Pacific Command activated Joint Task Force 505 five days later and the commander of III Marine Expeditionary Force, Lieutenant General John E. Wissler, assumed overall command of the relief mission, which continued until military operations ceased on 1 December 2013.⁴⁰ Noteworthy friction points that were identified were similar to those of Operation Tomodachi—some initial disaster relief correspondence was sent over the U.S. military’s Secret Internet Protocol Router Network—resulting in delays and wasted time and effort because this classified network is not shareable with the majority of partners. Overall, however, the mission was a success with 13,400 U.S. military personnel, 12 naval vessels, and 66 aircraft providing more than 1,300 relief flights and evacuating more than 21,000 people.⁴¹

The U.S. military’s response to Super Typhoon Haiyan was swift, effective, and strengthened already deep ties between the United States and the Philippines. The Marines and other U.S. military responders were praised for not only their quick response, but their effective partnerships with American civilian and Philippine responders.⁴² A nongovernmental organization in the Philippines conducted a randomly sampled poll of 1,500 Filipinos in December 2013 asking them to rank their level of trust in several countries, and the United States ranked number one at 82 percent, followed by Australia (53 percent) and Japan

(47 percent).⁴³ This was the highest level of public support for the United States that had been recorded since the survey was started in 1994. Though the U.S. military played a secondary role behind the lead of USAID and the government of the Philippines, the speed and scope of delivering relief supplies could not have happened without it, facts favorably noted by both the U.S. president and Congress.⁴⁴ Given the centrality of the U.S. Marines' role in providing disaster relief during Operation Damayan and how important it was to the Filipino people, Marine Corps public affairs offices created two videos to highlight the one- and three-year anniversaries of the mission.⁴⁵

Operation Sahayogi Saat—Nepal, 2015

On 25 April 2015, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck Nepal, causing landslides and avalanches throughout the Himalayas and destroying buildings in the capital, Kathmandu. The initial quake was followed by a series of aftershocks, causing 9,000 deaths, 22,000 people injured, and the loss of more than 600,000 buildings throughout the country.⁴⁶ Remote rural areas were particularly hard hit and the mountainous terrain throughout Nepal complicated relief efforts. Once again, Joint Task Force 505 was activated and deployed to Nepal as part of Operation Sahayogi Haat ("Helping Hand" in Nepali) in early May.⁴⁷

Joint Task Force 505's support to Operation Sahayogi Haat was impactful and provided much-needed aid, but it also came at a steep cost for the Marine Corps. The III Marine Expeditionary Force commander was again designated as the overall force commander that was comprised of approximately 300 U.S. military personnel in Nepal, supported by the Joint Task Force 505 Main in Okinawa and an intermediate staging base in Thailand.⁴⁸ By 10 May, four Marine Corps Bell UH-1Y Venom helicopters, two Marine Corps Lockheed Martin KC-130J Hercules aircraft, and four Marine Corps Bell Boeing MV-22B Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft were forward deployed and supported relief efforts.⁴⁹ Sadly, on 12 May, one of the Marine Venom helicopters suffered a mishap, resulting in the deaths of six Marines, two Nepalese Army liaison soldiers, and five Nepalese civilians.⁵⁰ This tragic loss of life served as a reminder that the military's mission during disaster relief operations—while distinct from combat—is not without mortal risk. Despite this incident, the severe challenges posed by Nepal's mountainous terrain and the political friction from neighboring China and India, Joint Task Force 505 pressed on.⁵¹ By the time of its deactivation on 26 May at the successful conclusion of its mission, the task force had worked with different countries to deliver 120 tons of relief supplies, transport 553 personnel, and conduct 69 casualty evacuations.⁵²

Relations between the United States and Nepal, especially in the military domain, strengthened in the aftermath of Joint Task Force 505's humanitarian aid operations. Members of the U.S. Congress were briefed about how military-to-military engagements prior to the earthquake set conditions for the successful multinational, interagency response to the crisis.⁵³ Though detailed polling data of Nepalese public opinion on the disaster response is not available

to the same extent as with Japan and the Philippines, it is noteworthy that since the earthquake, Nepal has expressed interest in joining the United States' "State Partnership Program" and welcomed exchanges with the Utah National Guard.⁵⁴ The willingness to partner with American troops is noteworthy, given the political pressures Nepal faces as a buffer state between the two U.S. Indo-Pacific Command powerhouse states of China and India.

The most poignant symbol of the strengthened U.S.-Nepal ties as a result of the earthquake, however, was the dedication of "Vengeance Hall," the Heritage Room in the U.S. embassy's Marine house in Kathmandu.⁵⁵ Named in honor of the Marines and Nepalese soldiers and civilians who perished in the crashed *Venom* (call sign "Vengeance 01"), the room serves as a continuous reminder of the bond between the U.S. Marines and the Nepalese people.⁵⁶ Brigadier General Tracy W. King, the commanding general of 3d Marine Logistics Group, participated in the ceremony and noted that "everybody knows that we'll march to the sound of the gun. I think this proves that we'll also march to the sound of the crisis . . . if you call us again, we'll be there."⁵⁷

Key Takeaways from Case Studies

The case studies presented here are not meant to provide best practices for how the Marines can better support foreign humanitarian assistance missions. A rich literature on this subject has already been published and restating others' recommendations does not advance understanding of the Marine Corps' role in disaster response.⁵⁸ Rather, the case study analyses are meant to inform the Corps' iterative planning and *Force Design 2030* efforts and to ensure that the essential role Marines play within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's foreign humanitarian assistance missions is accurately accounted for. The case studies present three main takeaways.

First, foreign humanitarian assistance operations are absolutely a part of the Marine Corps' identity. *Identity*, for purposes of this article, refers to the cultural representation of the organization that the Marine Corps builds both for itself and projects to the outside world.⁵⁹ The Marines' effectiveness in responding to each emergency aligns with existing cultural values, namely that "Marines will be ready and forward deployed" and that "Marines are agile and adaptable."⁶⁰ These values are not only internally understood by Marines, but externally recognized by senior DOD policy makers who know that the Corps' expeditionary nature makes it uniquely qualified to support foreign humanitarian assistance missions.⁶¹ The positive association of U.S. Marines with disaster relief operations within USPACOM extends at least as far back as the early 1990s, when grateful Bangladeshis welcomed the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade as "angels from the sea" following a deadly typhoon.⁶² The Marine Corps therefore views itself, and is viewed by others, as an organization that is ready and capable of supporting overseas disaster relief missions.

The Marine Corps takes deliberate steps to highlight and preserve its identity as an organization uniquely capable of supporting disaster relief operations—

with the 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance* being a notable exception. The archiving of Operation Tomodachi memorabilia in Quantico, the public affairs videos of U.S. Marines supporting relief missions in the Philippines, and the commemoration of Vengeance Hall in Nepal all demonstrate the justifiable pride that Marines have in providing foreign humanitarian assistance. These operations align perfectly with General James N. Mattis's famous admonition to 1st Marine Division to show the world that "there is 'No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy' than a U.S. Marine."⁶³ To say that these missions are not a part of the Marines' identity clashes with decades of historical precedent, Marine Corps doctrine, and stakeholder opinions to the contrary.

The second takeaway is that foreign humanitarian assistance missions facilitate access, which is an essential prerequisite for the Marine Corps' warfighting capability within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. The Marines' participation in disaster relief operations with two key theater allies, Japan and the Philippines, caused a surge in positive perceptions of the United States. While similar polling data is not available for Nepal, the fact that the country continues to welcome U.S. troops and advance discussions of participation in the State Partnership Program speaks volumes to the positive perceptions that Nepalese citizens have of the U.S. military.⁶⁴ While the warfighting payoff of these operations may not be immediately clear, the rapport and goodwill built from the Marines' participation in these operations builds the political cache required for the U.S. State Department to ensure access for Marine Corps forces, before and during the advent of hostilities.⁶⁵

The perception of U.S. military forces abroad is relevant to warfighting, because of the broad, systemic factors that can support or impede basing privileges in host-nation countries.⁶⁶ Simply put, the deployment of U.S. Marines in expeditionary advanced basing operations requires that host-nation forces are predisposed to allow them access. Given the positive support that participation in disaster relief missions engenders, a Marine force that can support foreign humanitarian assistance missions throughout the Indo-Pacific theater stands a much better chance of gaining and maintaining access than one limited to a conventional combat deterrent presence. The Marine Corps' ability to support foreign humanitarian operations within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command is therefore inextricably linked to its warfighting readiness.

A final takeaway is that foreign humanitarian assistance missions provide relevant, real-world experience for U.S. Marines. While current Marine Corps guidance emphasizes wargaming and training for high-end conflict is important, "People in the military get tired of just training. They want to go somewhere and do something."⁶⁷ In the post-Cold War era, and before the decades of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army recognized that humanitarian aid missions allowed soldiers to exercise and refine wartime skills beyond generic exercises through the snap deployment of personnel, logistics, and communications equipment.⁶⁸ Similarly, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard tri-service doctrine has repeatedly affirmed the value that overseas disaster response

operations have in achieving U.S. national security objectives and preserving maritime security.⁶⁹ Overseas humanitarian aid operations give Marines the invaluable opportunity to work in a Joint environment—in concert with other agencies and allies—during missions with life or death consequences, much in the same way that a joint/multinational force would have to stand up to contest China in the event of a kinetic conflict. The ability for Marines to identify friction points during these joint/bilateral disaster relief operations and test interoperability outside of preplanned exercises is therefore invaluable preparation for conventional conflict within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, improving warfighting readiness.

Addressing Criticisms

One potential critique of this article is that it too enthusiastically endorses the Marine Corps' role in supporting humanitarian assistance missions. This is problematic because, as previously outlined, the Department of State and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (within USAID) are the designated leads for the coordination of disaster response.⁷⁰ Moreover, the DOD's best practices for supporting overseas disaster relief operations clearly state that U.S. and "foreign military assets should be used as a last resort," not as a go-to force.⁷¹ In a perfect world, then, the Marine Corps would not need to concern itself with disaster relief operations, because the principal actors would be the Department of State and USAID, in consultation with foreign governments and militaries.

The response to this criticism is that the Marine Corps should be ready to operate in the world as it is, not an idealized version of itself. It is true that USAID is and will continue to be the lead for any U.S. government response to a foreign natural disaster and that host nation forces should always be the first line of defense in responding to a natural disaster. Yet, the Marines, and the DOD more broadly, have significantly more resources to deal with natural disasters than USAID and many countries within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and should, therefore, plan to assist during a major disaster. For comparison, the DOD's fiscal year (FY) 2021 budget request was a staggering \$705.4 billion, dwarfing both the USAID FY 2021 budget request (\$41 billion) and the 2020 gross domestic product (GDP) of Nepal (\$33.657 billion).⁷² The Marine Corps' forward-deployed posture and predominant focus in the Pacific, its doctrinal emphasis on expeditionary operations, and its access to amphibious, logistical supply chains make it uniquely qualified to support U.S. Indo-Pacific Command humanitarian aid missions.

The wisdom of Marines training early and often to support humanitarian aid missions with external organizations is borne from experience. The formal Joint after action review from Operation Sahayogi Haat stated that

U.S. Pacific Command security cooperation engagements and capacity building exercises were vital in preparing the Nepal Army for its role during a major earthquake response. . . .

[and that] the multi-year, pre-disaster planning effort led by Joint Task Force 505 (III Marine Expeditionary Force Command Element) provided situational awareness and positively influenced civil-military coordination. The Ambassador and U.S. State Department country team were familiar with the deploying commander and principal staff due to previous planning and senior leader activities.⁷³

While the Marine Corps should not be the lead agency responsible for disaster relief operations, it is clearly a valuable and smart investment for Marines to plan for these missions before a catastrophe strikes.

Even in a supporting role, however, it is important to note that too much Marine Corps participation in foreign humanitarian aid operations risks militarizing the overall perception of U.S. aid. Overemphasizing the military's role in aid relief, or worse yet, withholding military aid to strong-arm foreign policy objectives, can generate resentment with partners and allies and should be avoided at all costs.⁷⁴ China's military made this mistake during their response to the Philippines' request for aid after Typhoon Haiyan. While the Chinese government ultimately dispatched a 300-bed hospital ship to support relief operations, it did not arrive until nearly two weeks after the typhoon made landfall.⁷⁵ The delay was widely attributed to prior Chinese-Philippine government disagreements about South China Sea sovereignty claims and painted the Chinese mission in a negative light.⁷⁶ Similarly, after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, China's contribution of more than 500 People's Liberation Army personnel, three helicopters, and eight transport aircraft to the relief effort was undermined by their subsequent refusal to coordinate relief efforts with other military forces. The Chinese intransigence was so disruptive to the relief mission that U.S. officials in Nepal ultimately had to reach back to officials in both Beijing and Washington to resolve the impasse.⁷⁷ The imperative for Marines to support overseas humanitarian operations in the Indo-Pacific region must therefore be limited and executed in consultation with USAID, the State Department, and host nation forces.

Fortunately, the potential pitfalls of militarizing foreign aid can be avoided. Both the United Nations (UN) and the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance have handbooks that outline the best practices for military support to disaster relief missions.⁷⁸ Moreover, the case studies in this article demonstrate that the Marine Corps has a proven track record of executing humanitarian aid missions and should not shy away from supporting them in the future. On the contrary, a proactive effort by Marine commanders to facilitate civil-military coordination in advance of major disasters will ensure that Marines will continue to support these missions with minimal friction and that relief efforts are well-received by host nations.

A final criticism that bears addressing is that the Marine Corps—with the smallest share of the DOD budget—cannot afford to do humanitarian aid mis-

sions and deter or defeat China in the Pacific. The restructuring of the Marine Corps to defeat China's antiaccess/area-denial capabilities within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command means trade-offs, such as the divestment of some vertical-lift capabilities that could undercut the ability to provide logistics support during a humanitarian crisis.⁷⁹ Marine Corps leaders anticipate constrained defense budgets in the future and must make hard choices to prioritize the modernization of the force to defeat China in a conventional conflict.⁸⁰ Given limited time and resources, it is understandable that Marine Corps leaders may consider disaster relief missions in the Pacific as a costly distraction from preparing the force for full-scale conventional war with China.

There are three issues with this line of criticism. First, while the Marine Corps will lose some units/capabilities as part of its modernization efforts, future support to foreign humanitarian assistance missions does *not* have to look like it did in the past. Stating that the Marine Corps can either support war-fighting or foreign humanitarian assistance is a false dichotomy that ignores the myriad ways that Marines can support both missions. For example, since the Marine Corps is divesting of some vertical-lift capabilities but expending more money to purchase unmanned aerial vehicles, these new unmanned systems could be leveraged during a future humanitarian crisis to provide imagery of stricken regions and locate survivors. Instead of ignoring or avoiding the inexorable requests to support disaster relief missions, the Marine Corps would be best served by planning now for how the *Force Design 2030* force can support disaster relief missions in new ways.

A second response to this criticism is that the Marine Corps' resources devoted to overseas humanitarian aid operations within the Indo-Pacific region are well spent, even if they seem separate from the current focus on conventional combat with China. The reality is that full-scale war for China and the United States is a mutually undesirable end state, so myopically focusing on high-end combat misses other areas for Marines to contest growing Chinese influence.⁸¹ Future updates to planning guidance could more holistically consider the larger continuum of cooperation, competition, and confrontation with China.⁸² In this framing, Marine Corps resources that go toward cooperation (e.g., working alongside the Chinese military to provide disaster relief in Nepal) are well-spent because they ensure a continued U.S. presence for friends and allies in the region and balance against China, whose military has begun to take a more assertive role in this space.⁸³ Any organizational resources allocated to a natural disaster response can therefore be justified as supporting the Marines' identity as a crisis response force and improving cooperation with allies and partners amid rising Chinese influence.⁸⁴

Finally, and counterintuitively, studies and after action reports indicate that the best way for the Marine Corps to reduce the operational costs of participating in humanitarian operations is by early planning, not attempting to shed responsibility for the mission set.⁸⁵ Though it is beyond the scope of an unclassified article to analyze negative Marine Corps readiness impacts from

supporting foreign humanitarian aid operations in detail, a Naval Postgraduate School research report found that Marines could best improve the efficiency of disaster relief missions and reduce readiness impacts through early planning measures before a crisis.⁸⁶ These proactive steps include inviting humanitarian organizations to participate in unclassified planning sessions, developing communications contracts and protocols with allied and partner nations, and having a cadre of Marines trained in disaster response ready to serve as liaison officers within a larger international relief effort.⁸⁷ With these mitigation measures, the positive benefits that Marines will accrue from supporting real-world disaster relief operations will outweigh any short-term negative impacts that develop from using personnel and equipment to support foreign humanitarian assistance missions on short notice. Consequently, the best way for the Marine Corps to avoid readiness shortfalls from supporting overseas humanitarian aid missions is to lean in to planning for them, not to categorically avoid them in planning guidance.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps has a storied record of supporting foreign humanitarian aid missions within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, operations that are part of its identity and that support its overall warfighting readiness. The legal and doctrinal rationales that allow for the Marines to serve in a supporting role in disaster response efforts—not the main effort—are established and have been used to support real-world missions. That the Marine Corps is not the lead agency responsible for foreign humanitarian assistance missions does not, however, obviate the need to train for these missions in coordination with USAID, the State Department, and foreign militaries. Advance preparation ensures a smoother response when disaster strikes and, in the realm of disaster relief operations, reducing delays can mean fewer lives lost. The tactical-level experiences Marines gain by supporting these missions and the operational and strategic advantages gained in improving access for the U.S. military throughout the Indo-Pacific region cannot be stressed enough. Supporting foreign humanitarian assistance missions is an integral part of the Marine Corps' identity and supports—not impedes—its warfighting capability within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

The Marine Corps' *Force Design 2030* efforts, while laudable for taking bold steps to modernize the force against China, should avoid the false dilemma of preparing for warfighting or preparing for humanitarian aid missions. This either/or binary is a framing too narrow for how the Corps can employ its finite resources and shortchanges the positive impact of disaster relief missions. As outlined in this article, humanitarian aid missions improve warfighting readiness by facilitating access for U.S. military forces and providing relevant real-world operational experiences for military personnel. Training and planning for humanitarian aid missions is therefore an enabler for overall warfighting readiness.

Ultimately, as the Marine Corps' posture and capabilities in the Indo-

Pacific region change to prepare for conventional conflict with China, the central role of Marines' support of humanitarian relief missions should remain constant. The nature of this support can and will change—the force of 2030 will be manned, trained, and equipped differently than the force of today—but the exigencies of climate change, demographics, and geography will keep this mission relevant. Ideally, future updates to *Force Design 2030* will acknowledge this reality and include more detail on the Marine Corps' role in supporting foreign humanitarian assistance missions.

Endnotes

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