

Hearts and Minds: Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan and the Use of Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief to Further Strategic Ends

Seiji Yamada, MD, MPH

Abstract

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) should, as the term itself implies, be driven by humanitarian concern for the welfare of others. To use HADR for political or strategic ends distorts its purpose and introduces the potential for suspicion and distrust. In the aftermath of the November 2013 Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan, the U.S. military extended HADR to the affected regions of the Philippines. In the ensuing months, the signing of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allowed the U.S. military access to bases in the Philippines. Facing off against China's presence in the South China Sea, U.S. military presence in the Philippines is clearly intended to encircle China in a future war. With the ascendancy of Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency, the Philippines has begun to follow a more independent foreign policy. His stated intent to reverse EDCA has laid bare the use of HADR for strategic ends. The use of HADR by the U.S. as a ploy to gain strategic advantage is clear to the rest of the world. It is time to abandon the deception.

The history of US military presence in the Philippines prior to Yolanda

Both the pacification campaign conducted by the U.S. government during its invasion of Vietnam and the campaign to gain the support of the populace after

the 2003 invasion of Iraq were often referred to as winning "hearts and minds." These days, "hearts and minds" is used pejoratively, to signify the heavy-handed use of military power to influence public opinion in foreign countries.

In November 2013, in the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan, humanitarian aid and disaster response (HADR) were delivered to the Philippines by the U.S. military. While the logistical capabilities of military assets is undeniable, the use of military assets for disaster response represents a risk of departure from accepted humanitarian principles of "humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence."¹ That the U.S. response was intended, at least to some extent, to buoy public opinion of the U.S. among Filipinos became evident within six months of the typhoon. In April 2014, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), allowing the U.S. military access to facilities in the Philippines, including the stationing of troops, and prepositioning of weaponry, was signed during a visit by President Obama to President Aquino. For its part, the government of the Philippines failed to adequately respond to the needs of its people, and the Aquino administration relied on the lifting capacities of its former colonizer. With its own concerns about the building of island bases by China in the South China Sea, the Aquino administration found the post-typhoon U.S. military assistance a convenient justification for inviting an enhanced U.S. military presence on Philippines soil.

In 1898, with the Spanish-American War, the U.S. acquired the Philippines, Guam, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. During the 1899-1902 Philippine-American War, as the U.S. military pacified the Filipino populace to consolidate American rule, 34,000 to 220,000 Filipinos died, with more civilians dying from disease and starvation than from combat. In 1941, Imperial Japanese forces attacked Clark Air

Seiji Yamada, MD, MPH

Title: Professor

Affiliation: Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, John A. Burns School of Medicine University of Hawai'i

Email: seiji@hawaii.edu

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Force Base – simultaneously with its attack on Pearl Harbor – and rapidly forced U.S. forces out of the Philippines. Between 500,000 and one million Filipinos died during the 1942-1945 Japanese occupation. For fighting the Japanese occupiers, over 200,000 Filipinos were promised benefits afforded to U.S. WWII veterans, but these benefits were annulled in 1946 by an act of the U.S. Congress. After the Philippines became independent in 1946, the March 1947 Military Bases Agreement gave the U.S. possession of its military bases.

Clark Air Base and Naval Base Subic Bay were the largest overseas U.S. military installations in the world. Sexual exploitation of the adjacent Angeles City and Olongapo communities was rampant, and crimes committed by U.S. service members went unpunished. In addition, the military left behind toxic wastes whose effects are still felt today.² After the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo covered Clark Air Base with volcanic ash, the Philippine Senate rejected extension of the Military Bases Agreement, which expired in September 1991. With the Visiting Forces Agreement of 1998, the Armed Forces of the Philippines resumed participation in joint exercises with the U.S. military. The current U.S. Global War on Terror has included U.S. military presence in the Southern Philippines in operations against Muslim groups. A 2002 counterterrorism task force called Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) largely targeted the Islamic militant groups Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah who were operating on the island of Jolo.³

The Typhoon

On November 8, 2013, Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan made landfall over Eastern Samar. The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) named it Yolanda while the World Meteorological Office named it Haiyan. Yolanda/Haiyan had sustained winds of 195 mph (315 km/h), making it the most powerful tropical cyclone to make landfall in recorded history.⁴ The enclosed nature of San Pablo Bay, between the islands of Samar and Leyte, magnified the height of the storm surge – estimated to have been from 5-7 meters along much of the coast^{5,6} to 8 meters in height in the Anibong area of Tacloban.⁷ Tacloban, the major population center of Leyte, and towns to its south, Palo and Tanauan, was inundated by the storm surge that went inland for hundreds of meters. Storm surges are estimated to

have flooded 98 km² in Leyte and 93 km² in Samar.⁸ Drowning in the storm surge caused the majority of deaths. Messaging from the government failed to emphasize evacuation from the coastline, and evacuees were directed to shelters that could withstand high winds. While the term “storm surge” was used in government messaging, its implications were not understood by the populace.⁹ Thus, while the roof of the domed sports stadium in Tacloban, located on its oceanfront, survived the winds - many drowned or were trampled in the rush toward higher seats.

The Republic of the Philippines National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council reported that Yolanda/Haiyan had caused 6,300 deaths and 28,688 injuries. An additional 1,062 were reported as missing. Over 16 million persons from over 3.4 million families were affected. Over 1.1 million houses were damaged, of which more than 550,000 were totally destroyed.¹⁰ The people of Leyte and Samar believe there were many more casualties.^{11,12} It is estimated that the typhoon caused \$10 billion in economic losses, equivalent to 4% of the Philippines’ yearly GDP.¹³

The aftermath: failure of the Philippine government and the U.S. military deployment

The Philippine government failed to anticipate the extent of the damage and miscalculated its own capacity to respond. The days following the storm saw inadequate delivery of food, water, and shelter by the Philippine government to meet the needs of the survivors; many survivors abandoned their homes for other parts of the country because of the lack of supplies. The national government quarreled with the provincial government of Leyte along political lines. On November 13, President Aquino told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour that the early estimate of the number of dead, “ten thousand, I think is too much.”¹⁴ As people struggled to find basic survival items, law and order broke down and stores were looted. Inadequate transport led to relief goods rotting in storage.¹⁵

In response to a request for aid from the government of the Philippines, the U.S. Pacific Command established Joint Task Force-505. Usually forward-based in Yokosuka, Japan, the aircraft carrier USS George Washington, with its 5000 sailors and 80 aircraft, including 11 Marine V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, sailed to the Philippines from Hong Kong, where it was on a port visit.¹⁶ The

vertical take-off and landing capacity of the V-22 was prominently featured in media reports. The Third Marine Expeditionary Brigade, garrisoned in Okinawa, transported relief supplies to Tacloban and passengers from Tacloban to Manila.¹⁷ In all, the U.S. military evacuated nearly 20,000 people, delivered four million pounds of equipment and supplies, and logged 2400 hours of flight time.¹⁸

The use of HADR to advance U.S. military goals in the Indo-Pacific region is not by accident but rather by design. The rapid deployment of U.S. military assets had been planned for in joint exercises between the Philippines and U.S. militaries. The annual *Balikatan* (shoulder-to-shoulder) exercises in the two years prior to Yolanda/Haiyan were focused on disaster relief scenarios. As the U.S. deployed its forces, representatives of the government policy-oriented U.S. think tanks touted the benefits for the U.S. in building ties between militaries and between states.¹⁹

Within days of the typhoon, in an opinion piece in U.S.A. Today, RAND Corporation political scientist Jonah Blank noted,

The best battle is the one you don't have to fight. Most of the deployment of U.S. military resources is preventive: The U.S. stations troops throughout the world in the hope of shaping the political environment so as to avoid sending them into combat. The U.S. conducts training exercises with almost every nation it can, in part to decrease the likelihood of conducting actual warfare...

In these terms, deploying military resources for disaster relief is a remarkably effective — and inexpensive — investment in the future. One of the largest such deployments in history, the deployment of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and other assets following the Asian tsunami of 2004, is estimated to have cost \$857 million. That's roughly the price of three days' operations in Afghanistan last year.²⁰

The U.S. “pivot” to Asia

In a 2011 *Foreign Policy* feature Secretary of State Hillary Clinton elaborated on what the United States' focus should be for this century:

Open markets in Asia provide the United States with unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade, and access to cutting-

edge technology. Our economic recovery at home will depend on exports and the ability of American firms to tap into the vast and growing consumer base of Asia. Strategically, maintaining peace and security across the Asia-Pacific is increasingly crucial to global progress, whether through defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, countering the proliferation efforts of North Korea, or ensuring transparency in the military activities of the region's key players....

[...] in Southeast Asia, we are renewing and strengthening our alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, increasing, for example, the number of ship visits to the Philippines and working to ensure the successful training of Filipino counter-terrorism forces through our Joint Special Operations Task Force in Mindanao.²¹

The goodwill that the United States earns through relief efforts is presented as an opportunity to advance the geopolitical agenda of the United States — namely the “pivot,” later re-named the “rebalance,” to Asia — designed largely to counter the rise of China.²²

The Philippines had been engaged in a territorial dispute with China and other claimants over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. The Aquino administration had welcomed the increased U.S. military presence, conducting joint exercises in the South China Sea since 2012.²³ The U.S. HADR efforts buoyed Philippine public opinions about the U.S.

The on-the-ground reaction among the Yolanda survivors was effusive gratitude. They had been without the food, water, shelter and medical supplies the Philippine government was supposed to be providing, but wasn't, six days after Yolanda smashed into the Visayas. The Philippine media, meanwhile, universally hailed the "breathtaking" US effort, as did much of the Philippine population.²⁴

Even during November 2013, the Aquino administration's Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario noted that the U.S. involvement

“demonstrates the need for the framework agreement we’re working out with the US, because it accentuates the purposes of the framework, [one of] which is to make humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and response a very major aspect of the agreement.”²⁵

Other elements of Philippine society viewed the return of the U.S. military as capitalizing on the misery of the Filipino people.²⁶

Indeed, six months after the typhoon, the stationing of U.S. troops in the Philippines was furthered by the signing of the US-Philippines EDCA in April 2014 during President Obama’s visit to the Philippines. Domestically, this was perceived by many as the “re-colonization and reoccupation” of the Philippines by the US.

The US military is now able to “legally” station its soldiers, park its ships and aircraft, preposition and store war materiel including nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, and even build facilities contrary to the Filipinos’ national interest and in violation itself of the Philippine Constitution.²⁷

In *Shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*, Naomi Klein argues that terrorist acts, wars, and disasters become opportunities for advancing the profits of the private sector disaster complex.²⁸ In the case of the Philippines, climate change and natural disasters have become yet another opportunity for the U.S. to regain influence over its former colony.

Since the EDCA was signed, U.S. intervention in the Philippines has included a role in the Mamasapano operation, in which drones were used to track an Abu Sayyaf terrorist, and 44 members of the Philippine National Police Special Action Force members were killed.²⁹ The U.S. increased its military aid to the Philippines, to more than \$120 million in 2016, a level not seen in 15 years.³⁰ As China builds bases in the South China Sea, Japan is conducting joint military exercises with the Philippines and the U.S. on Palawan, the Philippine island which faces the South China Sea.³¹

Preparing for War with China

China’s territorial claim to the South China Sea is countered by the U.S. government’s contention that the important passage between the Pacific and Indian Oceans are international waters. The U.S. sends its

warships into the South China Sea to ensure “freedom of navigation,” though there is little incentive for China to interfere with commercial shipping.

On the other hand, China views B-52 overflights and the presence of U.S. Navy patrols as territorial incursions and provocations. While the U.S. may currently have an advantage in military assets, China is rapidly building up its forces and may soon surpass the U.S.³² The RAND Corporation monograph *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* estimates that China’s anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities may reach the point of military parity with the U.S. by 2025.³³ The U.S. Air Sea Battle concept, renamed in 2015 the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), plans conventional missile strikes on Chinese radar and command and control installations. If China interprets the incoming missiles as a possible nuclear attack, however, it may deploy its own nuclear missile arsenal – setting off a nuclear holocaust.³⁴

The Philippines Under President Duterte

President Rodrigo Duterte was sworn into office on June 30, 2016. His antipathy for the U.S. has been attributed to his youthful activism³⁵ as well as a 2002 incident in Davao City in which an American citizen in whose hotel room a bomb had exploded, was apparently spirited out of the Philippines by U.S. authorities.³⁶ Since assuming office, President Duterte has vowed to halt joint exercises with the U.S. military and get the U.S. military out of the southern Philippines. He has vowed to abrogate the EDCA, pronouncing, “I do not want to see any military man of any other nation except for the Philippine soldier. . . . That’s the long and short of it. I want an independent policy *na hindi pasunod-sunod* (that doesn’t follow anyone).”³⁷ In October 2016, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest declared that the EDCA is binding and sought to remind Duterte of the U.S. role in Philippines maritime security, counter-terrorism, and aid after Yolanda.³⁸ Upon learning that U.S. development assistance may not be renewed, Duterte has even threatened to repeal or abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement.

The government of Benigno S. Aquino had taken the South China Sea dispute to The Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. The court ruled against China’s claims to most of the South China Sea on July 12, 2016 on the basis of the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea. Traveling to China, Duterte has sought to de-escalate the potential for war with China and has struck a deal with China to allow Filipino fishermen back into the waters around Scarborough Shoal.

The Left has criticized President Duterte for extrajudicial killings in his war on drugs, the failure to release political prisoners, continued militarization in the countryside, as well as for reburying Ferdinand Marcos in the Libingan ng mga Bayani, the national heroes' cemetery. His plans to "separate" from the U.S. is, however, consistent with Left critiques of the U.S. presence in the Philippines. In rebuffing criticism by President Obama about the extrajudicial killings, Duterte brought up historical grievances with the U.S., citing a massacre of 600 Moro people in Bud Dajo, Jolo, Sulu in 1906 during the U.S.'s pacification campaign.³⁹ Duterte has thus shown himself to be acutely aware of the history of U.S. colonialism and neocolonialism in the Philippines. Those opposed to the hero's reburial of Marcos, however, would like him to have a similar historical memory of the Marcos martial law regime.

Furthermore, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) have long histories of receiving training and arms from the U.S., and they will not willingly cut those ties.⁴⁰ Indeed, less than a year into President Duterte's term in office, he was reasserting the Philippines claims on islands in the Spratlys in the South China Sea. In April 2017, the U.S. and Philippines military held their annual Balikatan joint exercises in the Western Visayas, fronting the South China Sea. Both militaries asserted that the purpose was to prepare for disaster response.⁴¹ However, the AFP was simultaneously involved in actions against the New People's Army (NPA). These included occupying villages in Samar in the Eastern Visayas which have yet to fully recover from Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan.⁴²

Conclusion

In the U.S. response to Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan, "soft power" (to be specific, the use of hard assets for a "soft" objective, i.e. HADR) was used to further "hard power" goals, in this case the strategic containment of China.⁴³ If we take the perspective of policymakers in China, there are many potential risks to using its military for HADR, including the risk of being perceived internationally as expanding China's strategic sphere of influence by exercising its airlift and amphibious capabilities.⁴⁴ Consequently, China,

as well as Russia, both of which have in the past utilized their militaries for crises and public health emergencies of international concern such as Ebola, have formed WHO civilian international emergency medical teams independent of their militaries.¹

Let us imagine, as a thought experiment, that in the aftermath of the January 2010 Haiti earthquake that China had sent an aircraft carrier, amphibious vessels, and its hospital ship instead of what it actually sent (a medical care and epidemic prevention team of 40 from the People's Liberation Army). Such a response would have been met with howls of indignation from Washington and claims that China was violating the Monroe Doctrine. Such a scenario might give us a glimpse into how the Chinese leaders view the re-entry of the U.S. into the Philippines. The analogy is imperfect, however, in that Haiti has long been under the influence of the U.S. (Under President Bill Clinton, the U.S. last sent its troops to Haiti in 1994 to topple the military regime.) The Philippines were never colonized by China.

The revival of a robust U.S. military presence in the Philippines destabilizes the region. To use another Caribbean analogy, this time a historical one – the placement of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba destabilized the region. It led to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, when the world came precariously close to nuclear destruction.

It is perhaps reflective of American exclusivism that U.S. policymakers do not stop to consider how U.S. actions appear to the rest of the world. Since the U.S. is militarily the dominant superpower on the planet, its tendency is to lead with its strength. While the fiascoes of military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq are recent memories for Americans themselves, Asians remember the destruction wrought in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia by the U.S. Filipinos remember being colonized by the U.S. They have not forgotten the era when Clark Air Base and Subic Bay were the largest overseas U.S. military installations in the world.

The events surrounding Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan should remind Americans (Filipinos are well aware) of the geographically broad and historically deep relations between the Philippines and the U.S. From the Filipino perspective, the use of military assets in the context of HADR as a means to win their "hearts and minds" is clear. The use of HADR as a ploy to gain strategic advantage is clear to the rest of the world. It is time to abandon the deception.

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