

The Military Foundations of U.S. Disaster Assistance in Japan

By Graham Webster
April 7, 2011

The United States has leveraged its military presence in the Asia-Pacific to contribute significant resources to the relief effort in Japan. NBR spoke with Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, former commander of the U.S. Pacific Command and current holder of NBR's John M. Shalikashvili Chair in National Security Studies, about the U.S. military's role in disaster response. Fargo said that long-term cooperation among militaries lays the groundwork for timely assistance to countries affected by natural disasters. This interview appears on the NBR website: www.nbr.org.

You were commander of the U.S. Pacific Command in 2004, when a powerful earthquake and tsunami struck Southeast Asia, crippling the region. How did the United States respond?

It was a devastating tragedy, as you're well aware. Between Aceh, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, the estimated loss of life was in the neighborhood of 250,000 people. Specifically, the situation in Indonesia was very much like that in Japan: the earthquake occurred so close to the coastline that there was almost no opportunity for anybody to evacuate or move to higher ground.

This happened on Boxing Day, and there was immediately a set of phone calls that were exchanged between myself and our friends and allies in the region, including the Australian Chief of the Defence Force Peter Cosgrove, our American ambassador in Jakarta, the Malaysian and Thai military leaders, and of course ultimately the Indonesian military, led by General Sutarto. That was all based on relationships and opportunities to work together that had been built over the previous three years.

How important was that groundwork, and does the strong U.S.–Japan relationship provide for similar cooperation?

I think that those relationships are hugely important, and of course they're built over time. The most immediate impact they had in the response to the Southeast Asian tsunami was that they allowed us to mobilize humanitarian assistance and disaster relief support throughout the region very quickly. We obtained access to U-Tapao Airport in Thailand and Butterworth in Malaysia, and obviously to Singapore. This facilitated the movement of immediate relief to the affected countries in a timely manner.

I think there's a clear parallel to Japan, where the principal applies even to a greater extent. Japan is our long-standing alliance partner and the habits of cooperation that have been built over some 50 years have allowed us to once again respond very quickly.

How is the U.S. response in Japan similar or different from the response in Southeast Asia?

In the case of Indonesia, the aircraft carrier and the amphibious shipping were underway immediately, because we recognized those platforms would be very important to access and provide support to Aceh, where the infrastructure is very modest. Of course, in Japan we have a three-star U.S. Forces Japan commander, and he was immediately designated as the operational commander to form a joint taskforce and bring relevant assets together to initiate the disaster relief effort.

The primary contrast between the two missions is that in Japan we have a very extensive and mature infrastructure from which to operate. The U.S. Forces Japan commander is based in Yokota, which is a joint base with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF). And of course we have other bases in that region, including the Yokosuka Naval Base and Misawa Air Base, all within about two hundred miles of Sendai—so we have more infrastructure to operate from in this particular case.

But the initial response will generally involve some essential elements, such as locating survivors and caring for displaced people. Water, food, and medical care are also important concerns. Those typically require significant lift assets. Helicopters are very valuable to move material into the devastated region.

At a Harvard event discussing the aftermath of the earthquake, former SDF Vice Admiral Yoji Koda described damages to Japanese military aircraft and other assets. Given the U.S. military's close relationship to the SDF, has the United States seen any damage or reduced readiness from the earthquake and tsunami?

We operate on almost a daily basis with the Japanese SDF, so we know each other well, we're tremendously interoperable, and we have built relationships that allow us to communicate clearly and comprehensively. This is the very best possible working relationship, and it has certainly proved to be so in this particular disaster.

Admiral Robert F. Willard, the current commander of the Pacific Command, was immediately in touch with his counterpart in the Japanese SDF. The respective relationships between the U.S. Navy, Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps and their Japanese counterparts were also exercised, so that's a huge advantage.

With respect to readiness impairments, I know Admiral Koda, and I'm sure he articulated very clearly the impact on the SDF, which have forces in the immediate vicinity of Sendai. The locations from which the United States operates—largely joint bases with the SDF—are over one hundred miles away from the immediate area of the tsunami. Thus, they were not affected to the same degree. Their readiness was very high from the outset and not impaired as a result of the earthquake and the tsunami.

The U.S.-Japan alliance and military-to-military cooperation have played a key role in coordinating the U.S. contribution to the response. Of course, the alliance involves some controversies, such as the debate over the Futenma Air Base relocation in Okinawa. Does this cooperation tell us anything about the future of the alliance?

I really believe that the U.S.-Japan alliance is enduring. The efforts that are underway that deal with the Futenma replacement facility and Guam are all intended to provide a structure that will ensure the relevance and stability of the alliance going forward. My sense on the military-to-military level is that there hasn't been any impact on those relationships from ongoing political

discussions. The level of cooperation and interoperability not only has been robust but has consistently improved for the last couple of decades. That, in fact, is part of the foundation of this relationship, making it possible for the alliance to endure any political bumps in the road and move forward. Of course, we are seeing it manifested right now in the relief effort, Operation Tomodachi.

Long-term relationships between the United States and other countries seem to be at the root of the U.S. military's ability to assist in times of disaster. How have these relationships been sustained?

I would emphasize that in all these efforts, we're supporting the host government. I think that's really key. The command and control arrangements for each humanitarian assistance and disaster relief effort are tailored to the particular situation. In addition, the work that is done week in and week out to exercise together, build relationships, and write standing operating procedures contributes tremendously to our ability to respond in a timely fashion to these regrettable tragedies.

We have unfortunately had to participate in a wide range of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts in the Pacific, from the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, to flooding in the Philippines and Bangladesh and the 2008 earthquake in China. Given the force structure we have in the region, the United States is in a position to make a significant contribution to such efforts and will do so in the future.

Graham Webster is an Intern at the National Bureau of Asian Research. He is also a Ph.D. student in political science at the University of Washington.