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De-escalation and diplomacy: disasters as drivers of reduced conflict risks in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

Interest in the impact of disasters on conflict risks is burgeoning. This is particularly the case for the Indo-Pacific region, which is highly vulnerable to disasters and experiences geopolitical competition as well as several armed conflicts. So far, the literature has predominantly focussed on the impact of disasters on higher conflict risks. We argue that considering the option that disasters can (temporarily) reduce conflict risks would benefit research, politics, and practice. To illustrate this argument, we focus on two possible mechanisms. First, disasters can catalyse short-term declines in armed conflict intensity by providing constraints to the conflict parties. This mechanism is supported by evidence from the civil wars in Kashmir (after the 2005 earthquake) and Bangladesh (after cyclone Sidr in 2007). Second, disasters provide opportunities for diplomacy between states, which can in turn reduce conflict risks, even though such diplomacy might suffer from a politicisation of disaster relief. Evidence from Australian disaster diplomacy after the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake (Indonesia) and the 2022 volcanic eruption in Tonga supports this mechanism. A more comprehensive, less conflict-focussed ontology would benefit further research on disasters and conflict.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; cooperation; hazard; security; violence

Introduction

Interest in the impact of disasters on conflicts is burgeoning. Researchers have recently assessed whether disasters intensify the risk of civil war (Caso *et al.* 2024), violence against civilians (Koren and Schon 2023), anti-government protests (Ide *et al.* 2021), hostility towards out-groups (Döring and Hall 2023), and international tensions (Nelson 2010). Partially inspired by academic insights, policymakers and practitioners have also articulated increasing concerns about a disaster-conflict nexus. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review of the Australian Government (2023, 41), for instance, argues that climate change increases disaster risks, which 'could lead to mass migration, increased demands for peacekeeping and peace enforcement, and intrastate and

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interstate conflict.' Likewise, Vietnam's representative to the UN Security Council, Dang Hoang Giang, expressed his concern about climate change (and the associated disasters) being a 'risk multiplier that intensifies conflict and can even contribute to conditions that create terrorism […] and impede development' (UN 2023).

The disaster-conflict nexus is hence crucial for wider debates about risks to peace and non-traditional security threats. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Indo-Pacific region. Politically, several parts of the region are unstable and prone to conflicts, as indicated by international tensions in the South Chinese Sea and the Pacific Island region as well as civil wars in India, Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, among others. At the same time, the Indo-Pacific is highly vulnerable to disasters. In the past twenty years, Bangladesh, China, India, the Philippines, and Thailand were among the worst-hit countries globally, with a total disaster-affected population of 3.15 billion people. High numbers of disaster-related deaths are reported in the same period for Indonesia (187,000), Myanmar (140,000), and China (113,000), while small island nations like Samoa and Niue suffer from some of the highest disaster-related mortality rates globally (van Loenhout, Below, and McClean 2020, 20–21).

In line with this, significant literature already deals with the disaster-conflict nexus in the region. A keyword search for articles on the topic in Scopus yielded 55 studies on disasters and conflict risks published since the year 2000, 12 of which focus on countries in the Asia-Pacific (22%, even though none focusses on the Pacific Island countries) (for details, see Canavan and Ide 2024). However, only three studies consider disasters as a potential factor in reducing the risk of conflict, and all focus on the same case: the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in Aceh (Enia 2008; Gaillard, Clavé, and Kelman 2008; LeBillon and Waizenegger 2007). This stands in contrast to a wealth of studies primarily concerned with disasters and increased conflict risks, including in Bangladesh (Petrova 2021), India (Gawande, Kapur, and Satyanath 2017), Indonesia (Caruso, Petrarca, and Ricciuiti 2016), the Philippines (Eastin 2018), and Sri Lanka (Kikuta 2019), among others. This aligns with broader concerns that global debates around disasters, peace, and conflict are overly focused on conflict (Ide 2023a; Kelman 2012), leading Barnett (2019) to conclude that the impact of (climate-related) disasters on peace and cooperation is often unaccounted for in both research and policy discussions (see next section for an in-depth discussion).

In this article, we explore the theoretical and empirical value of conceiving disasters as drivers of reduced conflict risks, with a particular focus on the Asia-Pacific region. To do so, we proceed in several steps. The next section (2) illustrates the existence of a widespread narrative linking disasters to the possibility of higher conflict risks in the Global South. This narrative is characterised by a conflict-focussed ontology that is problematic from an academic, political, and practical standpoint. In Section 3, we argue that disasters can catalyse short-term negative peace within states by providing constraints to armed conflict parties. This argument is backed by evidence from the 2005 Kashmir earthquake in India and from Bangladesh after cyclone Sidr in 2007. Section 4 turns to the international level by discussing opportunities for diplomacy between states after major disasters. While not without caveats, we demonstrate how Australian diplomatic and relief efforts supported positive diplomatic relations with Indonesia (after the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake) and Tonga (after the 2022 volcanic eruption). Section 5 discusses core insights and directions for future research.

The following definitions apply throughout the article. Natural hazards are extreme meteorological or geophysical events like extensive rain, high wind speeds, or a strong shaking of the ground. The exposure of vulnerable societies to such natural hazards results in a disaster. Vulnerability means that individuals or groups have insufficient power, resources, or abilities to prepare for or cope with a hazardous event. Disasters result in extensive destruction and the loss of lives (Kelman 2018). Conflicts are perceived incompatibilities of interests between at least two groups, with at least one group actively articulating such a perception. While conflicts can drive positive social change, if not stated otherwise, we focus here on disruptive forms of conflict that cause resentment among those involved and hence undermine prospects for cooperation. If groups use physical violence in a systematic way to enforce their interests, resulting in at least 25 fatalities, the term armed conflict is used (Gleditsch *et al.* 2002). We understand peace as a continuum that ranges from the mere absence of violence (negative peace) to situations where violent conflict resolution is unthinkable (warm peace) to substantive, mutually beneficial cooperation between parties (positive peace) (Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos 2021). Moving along this continuum towards positive peace hence decreases conflict risks. Such peace could hence also manifest itself in the form of diplomacy, negotiations, and ceasefires between conflict parties, particularly if they reduced the human security costs of conflict (everyday peace; see section 3).

The disaster-conflict narrative and its conflict-focussed ontology

When it comes to the security implications of disasters, the disaster-conflict narrative is the dominant view among scholars and policymakers. In short, this narrative claims that disasters increase conflict risks in Asia and the Pacific as well as in Africa and the Middle East. Disasters do so by fuelling grievances about insufficient disaster preparation and relief efforts, by triggering competition over scarce resources, by facilitating recruitment of deprived disaster survivors by armed groups, and by contributing to state fragility.

Already in the 1990s, Drury and Olson (1998, 153) diagnosed that '[a] connection between disasters and political unrest has often been suggested' and reported 'a direct and positive linkage between disaster severity and ensuing levels of political unrest'. Recently, scholars (Gleick 2014; Okpara *et al.* 2015), think tanks (Vivekananda *et al.* 2019; Werrell and Femia 2013), and policymakers (Daoust and Selby 2023; Selby and Hulme 2015) have speculated about links between drought and armed conflict onset in Syria and around Lake Chad. In the Asia-Pacific, India (Gawande, Kapur, and Satyanath 2017; Kingdon and Gray 2022), the Philippines (Eastin 2018; Eastin and Zech 2022), and Sri Lanka (Enia 2008; Kikuta 2019) are focal points of debates around disaster-related conflict risks. The disaster-conflict narrative most frequently refers to intrastate armed conflicts and civil wars, but experts have also articulated concerns about drought-related water wars in South(east) Asia, for instance between India and Pakistan or along the Mekong (Haines 2023; Immerzeel, van Beek, and Bierkens 2010).

While the studies and reports cited provide empirical evidence for it, the disaster-conflict narrative has not gone unchallenged. An alternative narrative, mostly put forward by critical scholars, argues that political and economic conditions are the main drivers of conflicts. They argue that disasters are not causally relevant for conflict risks and/or that disasters are a result of the same political-economic contexts

that also fuel conflicts such as poverty and marginalisation (e.g. Boege 2022; Daoudy 2020; Daoust and Selby 2023; Petrova 2021). However, in terms of theory and methods, many of those studies still primarily deal with the question of whether disasters increase conflict risks or not.

Going beyond this binary logic, some empirical studies find that and explain why conflict risks are lower in the aftermath of disasters (Ide 2023a; Nemeth and Lai 2022; Salehyan and Hendrix 2014). However, with some rare exceptions (e.g. Gaillard, Clavé, and Kelman 2008; Kelman 2012; Kreutz 2012), the literature does not explicitly deal with disaster impacts on various forms of peace, such as intergroup cooperation, peacebuilding processes, or improved relations between states. Furthermore, prominent reviews of the literature (e.g. Koubi 2019; Mach *et al.* 2019), impactful think tank reports (e.g. Vivekananda *et al.* 2019), and official security policy documents (see Vogler 2023 for an in-depth analysis) remain strongly focused on the disaster-conflict nexus, without much consideration of disaster impacts on peace or cooperation.

We argue that the dominant disaster-conflict narrative and the associated debate are too unidimensional because they are underpinned by an ontology that is overly conflict-focussed. In other words: Policymakers are concerned about the impact of disasters on conflicts, and most researchers likewise ask whether disasters increase conflict risks or not. This binary of either 'conflict accelerating impact' or 'no impact' excludes per se a third possibility, namely that disasters reduce conflict risks. Pelling and Dill (2010) argue that disasters are large, exogenous events that can catalyse change in social systems, but there is no reason to assume that such change needs to be inevitably confrontative or even destructive. This is particularly so as some studies are already challenging this narrative and argue that disasters open opportunities for diplomacy (Kelman 2012), provide incentives for ceasefires (Nemeth and Lai 2022), and stimulate intergroup cooperation (Islam and Walkerden 2014). In the words of Barnett (2019, 30), such an overt focus on conflict 'reflects an ontology of social relations as inherently agonistic'.

The conflict-focussed ontology is problematic for academic, political, and practical reasons. Academically, it prevents scholars from assessing the full range of security implications of disasters, and by extension, climate change and environmental shocks. These implications can range from violence and social tensions to no significant impacts to temporary conflict pauses and even forms of disaster diplomacy (Kelman 2012) and environmental peacebuilding (Johnson, Rodríguez, and Hoyos 2021). This is in line with critiques that peace and conflict scholars have produced a tremendous amount of work on (particularly armed) conflict, but devote much less attention to peace (Bright and Gledhill 2018).

Politically, the conflict-centrism of the dominant narrative suggests that more (intense) conflicts in the face of more (intense) disasters are inevitable, hence requiring preparation measures that only address the symptoms of the (presumed problems), for instance, enhanced military capacities (Barnett 2019). A conflict-centred ontology also discounts the possibility of peaceful reactions to disasters. As the relevant policy and research debates often focus on the Global South, there is a risk of reproducing stereotypes of the respective countries as naturally violent and incapable of problem-solving (Telford 2018; Vogler 2024).

Finally, from a practical perspective, people working on humanitarian assistance, disaster risk reduction, mediation, and peacebuilding would benefit from knowledge of

conflict de-escalation, diplomacy, and cooperation in the aftermath of disasters (Abrahams 2020). However, such insights are only possible when employing a broader ontology considering the implications of disasters for both conflict and cooperation or even peace.

Disasters as constraints to armed violence

In this section, we focus on armed violence between civil war parties, usually between a government and one or several rebel groups. Patterns of such violence, while originating from grievances and political antagonisms, are shaped by strategic environments. In other words, we understand armed conflict intensity to be a result of the opportunity structures and logistical hurdles armed groups face, as well as their strategic decisions in the face of these (Cederman and Vogt 2017; Fearon and Laitin 2003).

Two (possibly overlapping) sets of constraints are relevant in the context of disasters: those related to the military goals and logistics of armed groups (including state militaries), and those related to their political goals and communication strategies.

Disasters affect the military logistics of contestants in armed conflicts in various ways. On a very basic level, bases can be damaged and military personnel wounded or killed by the disaster. Armed groups would then have to prioritise repair, care, and re-organisation over combat tasks. Likewise, disasters limit mobility by making areas inaccessible or destroying infrastructure. If troops and supplies are negatively affected or rendered immobile, fighting activities will (temporarily) decline (Ide 2023b; Walch 2018b).

Disasters also result in various forms of shortages that affect rebels and the state. If a conflict party collects taxes in a disaster-affected territory, it will lose income due to the economic havoc caused by the disaster. In the aftermath of disasters, food is often scarce and labour is needed for recovery efforts (rather than, for instance, to support the local insurgency) (Bagozzi, Koren, and Mukherjee 2017). This disaster-related loss of money, resources, and personnel can severely undermine the fighting capabilities of armed groups. Supporting this argument, Tominaga and Lee (2021, 4) find that rebel groups relying on natural resource extraction are more likely to collapse in the aftermath of disasters as their funding sources run dry.

Disasters can further pose constraints to political goals and communication strategies. Armed groups often depend on domestic support (most notably by the local population), for instance when it comes to recruitment, hide-outs, and intelligence, as well as on international support, including weapon supply, troop training, hideouts across borders, and the avoidance of sanctions. As a consequence, armed groups need to carefully calculate the internal and external audience costs of their actions (Akcinaroglu, DiCicco, and Radziszewski 2011; Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2018). For instance, both local and international supporters might consider anything else than a post-disaster reduction in fighting activities or a ceasefire as unacceptable given the widespread humanitarian suffering. In this context, the state or the rebels might even need to redirect financial resources, goods or troops to the area to help with the disaster relief – or face a massive loss in legitimacy (Walch 2018a).

In sum, disasters can pose material, logistical, and political constraints to armed conflict parties. These limitations, if they negatively affect fighting capabilities, result

in a short-term decline in fighting intensity. While this is a very negative form of peace, it could provide an opportunity for negotiations, resulting in a more sustainable agreement, as we have seen in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, for example (Gaillard, Clavé, and Kelman 2008). Phases of conflict de-escalation also reduce the human costs of war and provide opportunities for the delivery of aid and medical support, hence contributing to every day (negative) peace (Berents 2018).

We substantiate this argument with two case studies from the Asia-Pacific region. These cases have been selected to draw insights from contexts that are vastly different, notably regarding the geographical and cultural setting, political system, type and intensity of disaster, and nature of the armed conflict, hence suggesting the results are plausible across different contexts.

India: the Kashmir insurgency after the 2005 earthquake

The territory today known as the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been claimed by Pakistan ever since the separation of both states in 1947, among others due to the predominantly Muslim population (over 80%) of J&K. Political marginalisation along with low levels of economic development caused occasional protests against India's Kashmir policies since the 1960s. When the ruling National Conference party rigged the 1987 local elections, anti-Indian resistance erupted into full-blown civil war in the Kashmir valley area of J&K. As part of this struggle, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has supported religious and pro-Pakistani groups like Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) with weapons, training, finance, and hideouts across the border (Sharma 2015; Snedden 2013).

On the 8th of October 2005, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck the Kashmir region. Damage in J&K was considerable, with more than 1,300 deaths and a total economic damage of US$ 359 million. In the Pakistani part of Kashmir, where the epicentre of the earthquake was located, the impacts were more severe: Over 73,000 people died and infrastructure losses alone amounted to over US$ 5 billion (Halvorson and Hamilton 2010; Nabi 2014).

The intensity of the Kashmir conflict was already declining prior to the earthquake. From 2003 on, improved relations between India and Pakistan reduced ISI's support for LeT and similar groups, while a tougher border control regime by India limited the inflow of foreign fighters. The local population's support for the insurgency, which has long been rather widespread, declined as well due to a certain war weariness, human right violations by LeT, and a preference for Kashmiri independence over unification with Pakistan (Staniland 2013).

That said, there was a still remarkable de-escalation of the Kashmir insurgency after the earthquake. When comparing the 12 months prior to and after the disaster, battle-related deaths declined from 1,388 to 870, which equals a reduction of 37% or 15 standard deviations. The de-escalation was particularly pronounced in the first six months after the earthquake (Sundberg and Melander 2013). Strategic constraints imposed by the earthquake are an important explanatory factor for this reduction in armed conflict intensity.

Pakistan-supported insurgent groups, most notably LeT, had their retreat areas and training camps in the Pakistani part of Kashmir that was heavily affected by the

earthquake. This resulted in a significant loss of fighters and goods as well as damage to the camps. Let alone lost at least 70 combatants during the earthquake and needed to conduct major repair operations afterwards. Supplying fighters with goods and moving them to places where they could cross the border to India was also complicated by infrastructure destruction. Furthermore, in Pakistan, 'in many cases the first to arrive on the scene to assist in post-earthquake rescue and relief efforts were members of Islamist groups, including militant jihadi organisations' (Wilder 2010: S416). Therefore, with fighters and supplies lost, logistics impeded, and many members committed to relief and recovery tasks (either for the insurgents or the surrounding communities), the Pakistan-based Kashmir insurgents lacked the capability to continue fighting with the same intensity as before the earthquake. The disaster also provides constraints to the Indian military in the form of infrastructure destruction and the need to engage in rescue and recovery efforts in J&K (ADB 2006; Nabi 2014).

In addition, Pakistan faced strong international pressure to constrain terrorism after the 9/11 attacks as well as after the 7/7 bombings in London (which happened merely three months before the earthquake). In the aftermath of the earthquake, the international spotlight was on Kashmir. For instance, military personnel from 19 countries participated in the relief and rescue operations in Pakistan (Cosgrave and Herson 2008). In such a situation, the escalation or even continuation of violent attacks by Pakistan-based non-state groups would have put the Pakistani government in a bad light, both generally and in the context of the 'war on terror' (Sharma 2015). In other words, there were strong incentives in place for the Pakistani government and the ISI to urge the insurgents to take a more cautious approach, at least temporarily (Samii 2006; Staniland 2013).

Bangladesh: cyclone Sidr and anti-Maoist state violence

The Bangladeshi government faced political and armed opposition from several Maoist groups since the early 1970s. For several decades, conflict intensity remained low and the insurgents were fragmented. The situation changed in the early 2000s, when the Janajuddha Faction of the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP-J) marginalised its Maoist competitors, gained some popular support in western Bangladesh, and waged a guerrilla war against the government (South Asia Terrorism Portal 2018; Suykens and Islam 2015).

On the 15th of November 2007, cyclone Sidr hit southwestern Bangladesh. The impacts of the storm were massive, causing more than 4,000 deaths and economic damage of around US$ 1.7 billion (Paul 2009). Overall, Sidr had an adverse impact on nine million people, with the poor being disproportionally affected. In the face of this massive disaster, the government deployed more than 40,000 personnel to assist with the response, the majority of which were members of the police or military (IFRC 2007). There are also widespread reports about an increase in solidarity and mutual support in local communities in the first weeks after the cyclone (Islam and Walkerden 2014).

Available data indicates a clear de-escalation of the civil war between the Bangladeshi government and the PBCP-J after Sidr. When comparing the respective 12-month periods prior to and after the cyclone, fatalities decreased from 22 to 11, and reduction

of 50% or 6.5 standard deviations. The first six months after the disaster saw only two battle-related deaths at all, but fatalities moved back to pre-disaster levels thereafter (Sundberg and Melander 2013).

A remarkable characteristic of the civil war de-escalation was a strong reduction in police operations against PBCP-J hideouts in the first months after Sidr. This was due to two factors. First, the government deployed several thousand security forces to the disaster response, in addition to those policemen deployed to implement the restrictions on political activities ahead of the 2007 elections. This reallocation of manpower drained the capabilities of the security forces to conduct operations against the Maoist rebels. Second, the devastation caused by the cyclone complicated security forces' access to and intelligence gathering in southwestern Bangladesh, where the PBCP-J had established several strongholds and where, prior to the cyclone, the security forces frequently conducted counterinsurgency operations. As a result, targeted attacks against rebel hideouts became more difficult and consequentially less frequent. At the same time, the PBCP-J was unable to capitalise on the government's temporary weakness and to stage additional attacks. It faced logistical constraints related to the destruction caused by Sidr and was too disconnected from the local population to capitalise on disaster-related grievances (Haque and Jahan 2016; ICM 2018; Nadiruzzaman and Wrathall 2015).

Disaster diplomacy between states

Already early disaster sociologists discussed the possibility of greater cooperation and less conflict afters disasters. In a classical work on the topic, Fritz and Williams (1957, 48) conclude:

> The net result of most disasters is a dramatic increase in social solidarity among the affected populace during the emergency and immediate postemergency periods. The sharing of a common threat to survival and the common suffering produced by the disaster tend to produce a breakdown of pre-existing social distinctions and a great outpouring of love, generosity, and altruism.

Kelman (2012, 2018) drew on these insights to introduce the concept of disaster diplomacy, defined as the initiation or intensification of cooperative activities related to disaster prevention, preparation, relief, and recovery. In line with most other work on the topic, we focus here on formal disaster diplomacy between states (Duda and Kelman 2023).

Four (often closely intertwined) mechanisms can catalyse disaster diplomacy between states. First, disasters increase solidarity between audiences and political elites in both states. This is particularly true for solidarity with the country or population devastated by a storm, flood, earthquake etc. Such a boost in solidarity provides a moral high ground to those already in favours for reconciliation and cooperation, and creates audience costs for political elites or movements opposing closer cooperation (Akcinaroglu, DiCicco, and Radziszewski 2011). Second, by cooperating on disaster-related issues, such as sharing data for early warning systems or coordinating relief efforts, professionals and diplomats of different countries often work closely with each other. This, in turn, could boost trust and understanding (Holloway 2000; Ide 2019).

Third, particularly rapid-onset, high-impact disasters attract large amounts of international attention and international aid. Donors and media often put pressure on disaster-affected states (as well as on conflict parties within states) to put aside their differences (at least temporarily) and cooperate to provide relief and reconstruction (Gaillard, Clavé, and Kelman 2008). Finally, receiving aid and support from another state in an hour of need often creates trust and a sense of thankfulness among the public and elites of the disaster-affected country (Streich and Mislan 2014). This idea is indeed fundamental to many efforts to use emergency aid as a foreign policy tool for enhancing a state's reputation. Importantly, Mandel (2002) notes that disaster aid increases the legitimacy of the providers even if not delivered very effectively. In other words, even if the disaster-related diplomacy and relief efforts are short-lived, they can have longer-term reputational impacts.

Both the onset and effectiveness of disaster diplomacy are particularly likely if several context factors are present. These include pre-existing cooperation between the states, civil society and scientific networks across both countries, early initiation of and clear communication about disaster-related efforts, the absence of unrealistically high expectations, and avoiding the politicisation of disaster diplomacy (Kelman 2012; Streich and Mislan 2014).

In a nutshell, disaster diplomacy proposes that disasters can reduce conflict and facilitate cooperation between states, particularly through the delivery and coordination of aid. This mechanism can work between broader publics, between political elites, and on both levels simultaneously. Disaster diplomacy hence poses a challenge to the conflict-focussed ontology of the research field by illustrating how disasters can facilitate improved relationships, hence lowering conflict risks by creating a climate of trust and cooperation (warm peace).

In the remainder of this section, we illustrate and support, but also nuance this argument by analysing Australian aid efforts in two very different contexts across the Indo-Pacific: Indonesia after the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake and Tonga after the 2022 volcanic eruption. This assessment occurs against the background that Australia (along with allied countries) is 'increasingly using their armed forces to deliver Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Response (HADR) as a way of engaging with the [Asia-Pacific] region' (Newby 2020, 72). Both dyads of countries were in a relation of negative peace in the years prior to the disasters. They did not engage in militarised disputes or rivalries, but they also lacked the mutual trust and sustained cooperation that characterised warm (or even positive) peace (Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos 2021). Consequentially, we conceive disaster-related cooperation and trust building between Australia and Indonesia or Tonga as a furthering of peaceful relations, and hence as a reduction of conflict risks.

Indonesia: aid provision and aid politicisation after the Donggala-Palu earthquake

On the 28th of September 2018, a 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck the neck of the Minahasa peninsula in Indonesia. The earthquake had its epicentre in the mountainous Donggala regency of central Sulawesi and resulted in a tsunami that hit the city of Palu. The impacts of this disaster were devastating A total of 2,256 people lost their lives, 1,309

went missing, 4,612 were injured, and 223,751 people were displaced. The disaster caused extensive destruction to buildings and infrastructure, including 68,451 houses, 265 schools, 78 offices, 362 shops, and seven bridges (BNPB 2018).

Considering its magnitude, the disaster drew attention to international solidarity and support. Australia was one of the first countries to respond. The Australian Prime Minister at the time – Scott Morrison – offered extensive assistance to Indonesia. He also scheduled a phone call with then-Indonesian President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo to express his sympathies and offer support. Australia quickly went on to commit AU$10.25 million, delivered through humanitarian agencies in the form of clean water, tents, shelter, blankets, sleeping mats, hygiene products, and health goods. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) also scheduled eleven flights to deliver aid to the affected region in Sulawesi (DFAT 2018).

Even though the scale of the disaster in Donggala and Palu was significant, the Indonesian government did not officially classify it as a national disaster. The National Disaster Management Authority (BNPB) explicitly emphasised that the government has the capacity to respond to the earthquake without resorting to such measures (CNBC Indonesia 2018). Political sensitivities were also at play. Due to the upcoming 2019 presidential election, the government was reluctant to declare an emergency because this could be interpreted as a sign of bad preparation and limited capacities. Nevertheless, opposition parties were quick to criticise this decision. Opposition parties were quick to argue that the government was indeed ill-prepared for the earthquake, and that the decision to not declare a national disaster further highlights its incompetence and lack of care. President Widodo countered these claims, arguing that the speed and scale of the response matters, rather than the declaration of a national disaster (CNN Indonesia 2018a, 2018b).

The politically sensitive situation also affected the assistance provided by foreign governments, including by the Australian government. Within Indonesia, a narrative emerged which portrayed the inflow of foreign aid as evidence that state authorities (and notably the government) were incapable and incompetent in handling disasters, hence needing assistance from foreign countries. Australian aid was hence caught up in political struggles between the government and the opposition parties. Furthermore, the general public and several media expressed concerns about the long-term consequences of Australian (and other international) aid, as Indonesia may be expected to reciprocate support in the future (Tirto 2018).

Due to the emergence of these negative discourses, the Indonesian government became more cautious of accepting and publicly acknowledging foreign aid, hence limiting the potential effect of disaster diplomacy. The resulting expulsion of foreign humanitarian workers by the BNPB, including one Australian citizen, also caused some bewilderment among the Australian government (ABC News 2018).

These developments nuanced claims about the effectiveness of disaster diplomacy (see also: Kelman 2012). However, the Indonesian government repeatedly and publicly thanked its Australian counterpart for the support. Goodwill between both governments persisted throughout the disaster response, even though it was expressed more informally in later stages. The majority of media in Indonesia also continued to portray Australian support in a positive way (DFAT 2018; Tirto 2018). While of limited effectiveness, Australian disaster diplomacy still contributed to trust and improved relations between both countries, hence at least slightly reducing the risks of future conflicts.

Tonga 2022: undersea volcanic eruption and tsunami

Tonga is a Polynesian nation comprised of 176 islands in the Pacific. On the 15 January 2022, a large undersea volcanic eruption and a tsunami impacted the country. The eruption was the largest in 30 years and, together with the tsunami, caused extensive damage. The disaster resulted in three deaths, over 1,500 displaced people, and the damaging to over 600 buildings (which are severe impacts given the small size of the country). Severe damage to an undersea fibre optic cable complicated domestic and international communication, rendering it extremely difficult for residents to communicate with each other and with the outside world in the aftermath of the disaster. On the Tongatapu and Ha'apai island groups, 85% of agricultural households lost crops, livestock, or fishery equipment (DFAT 2022b).

Australia's response included the deployment of over 600 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel and numerous aircraft and naval vessels to support the disaster relief. Australian Aid, administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), also provided support, hence furthering the involvement of the Australian government. Operation Tonga Assist provided 88 tonnes of humanitarian supplies as well as engineering, medical, and logistics equipment. The vessels served as hospital facilities in the post-disaster contexts, but also generated electricity and supplied safe water (Defence Australia 2022).

The government and media in Tonga received the support provided by Australia very well (DFAT 2022a; Maitangi Tonga Online 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). There was notable goodwill towards Australia due to the support provided to Tonga during this time of crisis. While present at the arrival of HMAS Canberra in Nuku'alofa harbour, Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni commended the 'character and resilience of Australia' and extended 'heartfelt gratitude' for Australia's assistance (Maitangi Tonga Online 2022c). The Tongan High Commissioner in Canberra, Princess Angelika Lātūfuipeka Tuku'aho, also expressed the gratitude of the Tongan people towards the Australian Government, including ADF and DFAT (Maitangi Tonga Online 2022a). Media commented favourably on the clean-up of the Pangaimotu Island monument (which marks the site of the first Catholic mass held in Tonga in 1842) by HMAS Adelaide personnel, highlighting that Australia displays respect for local history (Maitangi Tonga Online 2022b).

Providing disaster relief was an entry point for further diplomatic engagement and an intensification of bilateral relations. At a June 2022 joint press conference with the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong, Prime Minister Sovaleni stated that Australian aid 'has always played a significant role' in the development of Tonga. He also outlined joint development priorities for both countries, several of which align with disaster risk reduction, such as education, health, defence, and climate change, and suggested a strengthening of partnerships between Australia and the Pacific (DFAT 2022b).

Taken together, the statements and actions during and after the volcanic eruption suggest that engaging in disaster diplomacy facilitates trust and cooperation between both countries. This was a contribution to building warm peace (from a relationship of negative peace) between Australia and Tonga, and hence also reduced the risk of conflicts between them.

Discussion and conclusion

This article argues that current debates around disasters and conflict are all too often underpinned by a conflict-focussed ontology to the detriment of research, politics, and practice. Experts and decision-makers frequently only consider two potential (conflict-related) outcomes of disasters – higher conflict risks and no change in conflict risks – while ignoring the possibility of reduced conflict risks (despite several studies pointing towards disaster impacts on peace, diplomacy, and cooperation). This results in a lack of knowledge on logistical constraints and cooperation after disasters, and risks portraying those affected by the disaster as unable to find non-violent solutions.

We address this shortcoming by outlining two potential 'peace pathways' after disasters: logistical and communicative constraints to armed conflict parties within states facilitating short-term reductions in fighting (which can, however, provide windows of opportunity for negotiations and the delivery of relief), and diplomatic engagement and relief provision between states after disasters resulting in improved bilateral relations.

Empirically, we focus on the Indo-Pacific region, which is most vulnerable to disasters and disaster-conflict intersections. Case studies in Bangladesh and Kashmir illustrate that disaster can result in a reduction of civil war intensity because the conflict parties are occupied with the disaster response and fear audience costs when fighting in the wake of a humanitarian emergency. However, such fighting de-escalation is often short-term only. It allows for relief provision and reduces the human security impacts of fighting, but rarely translates into sustained negotiations. Likewise, our two case studies of Australian engagement in Indonesia and Tonga demonstrate that disaster diplomacy can be an entry point for improved bilateral relations. Such effects can be complicated, however, by the politicisation of external disaster-related aid (see also Moore 2024). Wider political factors also played a key role in reducing conflict risks in the cases under study, such as a history of cooperation between Tonga and Australia, the formation of the caretaker government in Bangladesh, or improved border protection in Kashmir.

Our findings offer several insights for broader debates. Given that disasters can facilitate reduced conflict risks, research on climate change and security should pay further attention to peaceful outcomes in the wake of climatic extremes (Barnett 2019; Ide 2023b). Furthermore, Kelman (2012, 131) concludes that 'disaster diplomacy tends to display few and limited success.' Our insights particularly on the 2022 volcanic eruption in Tonga offer a more optimistic outlook. This might be the case because Kelman mostly focuses on high-profile, protracted conflicts that offer fewer entry points for disaster diplomacy. Finally, our study can provide insights on other forms of 'external' shocks, such as economic crises or infectious diseases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, several armed groups declared ceasefires, officially to allow for a better health response, but often also because the pandemic undermined their capacities (Newman, Saikia, and Waterman 2023). Likewise, many states used health diplomacy measures such as providing equipment or vaccines to improve their international relations (Chattu and Andy Knight 2019).

Further research should test whether our findings hold when using different methods and analysing other cases, including those outside the Indo-Pacific region. This would

also enable scholars to specify the contextual factors and conditions under which disasters either increase, decrease, or have no impact on conflict risks. Based on the cases discussed here, widespread infrastructure destruction that causes mobility constraints and the disaster negatively affects the armed groups' resources (for civil war de-escalation) as well as a history of cooperation and the absence of internal politicisation (for international disaster diplomacy) are contextual factors worth of further investigation. The resulting knowledge could also help diplomats, disaster risk reduction practitioners, and peacebuilding experts to respond more effectively to disasters and to use windows of opportunity such catastrophic events may open (Peters and Kelman 2020).

Finally, we would like to emphasise that a more comprehensive ontology entails more than considering the full range of peace and conflict impacts of disasters. While this was the focus of our analysis, others have highlighted the relevance of going beyond traditional conflict actors (e.g. states and rebel groups) by considering local communities and their agencies more thoroughly (Siddiqi 2022). In line with that, multi-scalar ontologies that consider the interactions between local, national, and transnational actors (e.g. regional institutions and international aid agencies) are a promising direction for future research (Venner, García-Lamarca, and Olazabal 2024; Wallis, Jeffery, and Kent 2016).

Disasters, armed conflicts, and international tensions are prevalent challenges to human security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. With interest in their intersections rising among policymakers as well, studying the disaster-peace/conflict nexus will remain important for the foreseeable future. This nexus is also firmly embedded in discourses on environmental conflicts and climate security. By considering the full range of security implications of disasters, including civil war de-escalation and international disaster diplomacy, this study opened perspectives for more ontologically balanced and policy-relevant work on the topic.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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