

# India's Evolving Disaster Relief Cooperation with Southeast Asia

By Dhanasree Jayaram

India's longstanding experience in disaster relief cooperation with its South and Southeast Asian neighbours (and beyond) is leading it to seek the status of a 'net security provider' in the region. Although India's activities in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) gained international attention during its efforts in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, its HADR engagement with Southeast Asian countries can actually be traced back to the 1990s, as part of its Look East Policy (LEP). With the transformation of the LEP to Act East Policy (AEP), this cooperation has been further revitalised.

While the Southeast Asian nations see India as an important HADR partner, there continues to be challenges and gaps in the relationship that prevent India from becoming a full-fledged 'net security provider' for the region. However, as India's disaster relief cooperation broadens and strengthens with individual Southeast Asian countries, as well as multilateral organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quad, its image as a reliable and preferred security partner in the region will be enhanced.

## India's Strengths in Disaster Relief Cooperation with Southeast Asia

In material terms, India's biggest strength is



*Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Ministry of Defence of India*

its military when it comes to disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asia. Following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that affected both South and Southeast Asian nations, India conducted one of its largest multinational HADR operations alongside its partners, the United States, Australia, and Japan (that later went on to become the Quad), in which its military was a leading actor. Since then, it has emerged as a major HADR partner for the region's countries. This is also partly attributable to the institutionalisation of its HADR engagement with the region through the establishment of the **Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff** (HQ-IDS) and the Defence Crisis Management Group (DCMG) that coordinate these activities. This is evident in the way it has provided support to countries such as the Philippines (for example, 2013 Typhoon Haiyan and 2018 double disaster in Indonesia due to earthquake and tsunami).

In order to strengthen its partnership with Southeast Asian countries, India has focussed on not only enhancing post-disaster relief and rescue cooperation with the region, but also improving its disaster preparedness through bilateral and multilateral exercises primarily led by the military. On the one hand, it is an integral part of several ASEAN-centred disaster management-related mechanisms such as the **ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) Work Programme** and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), which has been acknowledged by ASEAN countries as critical to the ASEAN-India strategic partnership. On the other hand, individual ASEAN members have been invited and integrated into several multilateral platforms/initiatives led by India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Milan, an annual multilateral naval exercise hosted by the Indian Navy.

There has been an uptick in the number of bilateral HADR exercises between India and some of the ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, which are aimed at enhancing capacity-building, especially among militaries, by improving interoperability, personnel training, and sharing of knowledge and technological know-how. In some cases, the individual ASEAN countries' foreign policy and strategic imperatives also shape their partnerships with India, at the core of which, HADR lies along with other security concerns.

For example, Chinese actions in the South China Sea have influenced India-Vietnam defence and security relations in a significant manner. In 2022, the **People's Army of Vietnam** conducted a field training exercise (VINBAX) with the Indian army as a part of India-Vietnam multiagency (bilateral) HADR exercise held in India—the first time that it did so with a foreign army.

What is equally critical in India's disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asian countries is its normative engagement with them. India has consistently been resistant to interventionist approaches to HADR operations. With Southeast Asian countries, too, India has largely adhered to the rules and norms of engagement of the disaster-affected country while deploying military assets to carry out rescue and relief operations. It has therefore portrayed itself to be different from the Western countries that endorsed the application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle on Myanmar when it rejected international aid following Cyclone Nargis in 2008. India along with the ASEAN countries and a few others such as China did not favour the R2P approach in the case of disaster relief. Instead, it chose the path of **“capacity-building and closed-door diplomacy”** to accommodate the Myanmar regime's interests and win its trust. This form of non-interventionist approach has helped India build stronger partnerships with the Southeast Asian countries.

## Gaps and Challenges in India's Disaster Relief Cooperation with Southeast Asia

Even though India's disaster relief cooperation with Southeast Asian nations has grown manifold and has led to the deepening of security ties, there remain several shortcomings and challenges. Although India has so far been lauded for its quick, coordinated, and timely response to disasters in the region, it still has limited capabilities to launch a large-scale HADR operation in the broader Indo-Pacific region (if not in the IOR). For a long time, India was seen as a reluctant power that was unwilling to take up any burden-sharing on issues concerning global or regional governance. However, with the shifts in India's approach, driven especially by its desire to be seen as a **'responsible power'** over the past decade, this perception has begun to change in Southeast Asia.

The challenge remains as to how some of the existing regional forums and mechanisms, including IONS and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)—which include some Southeast Asian countries and have been focussing on HADR as an area of cooperation—can be made more effective. A more formalised regional cooperation framework, which does not merely depend on irregular HADR exercises and ad-hoc informal exchanges, could bring continuity and greater tangible outcomes to India-Southeast Asia disaster relief cooperation.

Another challenge for India is to balance

between its bilateral partnerships and multilateral engagement with ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS), all of which, involves interactions with China, with whom its relations have soured dramatically over the past few years. India remains sceptical of any multilateral frameworks in the region that are perceived to be China-led or dominated, as seen by its decision to opt out of the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)** in 2020. At the same time, in terms of bilateral partnerships, it does not have the same level of cooperation with all Southeast Asian countries. Historical, cultural, and geopolitical/geostrategic factors have led India to have much closer relations with countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam, while its ties with others in the region could be further improved.

Another critical missing element in India's disaster relief approach(es) is civilian engagement. Its HADR operations and exercises are primarily led by the military, leading to a huge gap in civil-military engagement that is crucial for HADR in general, and more specifically within the ASEAN disaster management-related institutional mechanisms and individual Southeast Asian countries. A country like India, with massive human resources and technical expertise in disaster preparedness, needs to more formally and systematically integrate its civilian agencies and organisations into its external HADR policies and strategies. The **National Disaster Response Force (NDRF)**,

“a specialized force created by the Ministry of Home Affairs, under the 2005 Disaster Management Act” for disaster response, is being gradually integrated into India’s external HADR activities, including in Southeast Asia.

### India’s Future HADR Role in Southeast Asia

To a certain extent, India’s engagement with the Quad gives it a means to share the experiences and capacities of the other three countries that have been more active in regional HADR in Southeast Asia. For the Quad, HADR is a focal area of cooperation, which is evidenced by the coming into effect of the **Guidelines for the Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indo-Pacific**.

India has a crucial role to play in maintaining ASEAN centrality in the many initiatives that are expected to be launched under this partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

India’s HADR efforts in Southeast Asia thus far have been largely lauded by its partners and the disaster-affected countries. Yet its aspiration to be viewed as a **“net security provider in the Indo-Pacific”** requires it to take a proactive, multi-actor, multi-sectoral, and institutionalised burden-sharing approach to HADR cooperation with Southeast Asia and beyond.

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