



Humanitarianism in the Security Challenged States in Asia: A Lesson for Transformational Inter-State Relations and People to People Understanding

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Abstract

History in Asia is replete with records of states that have struggled to overcome both man-made and natural disasters. Certain states in the region have more pronounced and long-term concerns on defense, territorial, ideological and ethnic conflicts that have pervaded collective national efforts, and at the same time, defined national interests. In the recent past, the increase in frequency and intensity of natural disasters in certain states has caused more suffering to people in the continent.

Given such, these security challenged states have found ways in their foreign policies to articulate compassion through humanitarian support that has caused a deeper sense of understanding and cooperation beyond the level of states or political elites. For most common people, the bilateral humanitarian exchanges that have taken and are taking place, have not only “educated” people about diverse cultures, but have also evoked powerful positive emotions that could advance reciprocal altruism and closer understanding of peoples.

Introduction

The foreign policies provide a window as to how states define actions that are structured within the realm of national interests. Defining “national interest” especially in relation to events or issues involving other states, is a complex and perplexing exercise. This is true especially for those states that are seriously challenged by factors that are external to them. This is further compounded when the response(s) to be articulated by the state is viewed to be politically



unpopular as far as other states—big or small—would perceive it; but nevertheless the issue needs to be swiftly acted upon given the urgency of the problem, particularly those that involve the saving of lives.

A security challenged state, as presented in this paper, is characterized by political and military realities that threaten both the territorial integrity of the state and the survival of its people. These threats are can also be in the form of conflicts, tensions and wars, as well as high vulnerability to natural hazards. Further, the political and military limitations of a state are not only characterized by the number of alliances it has, or the absence of sophisticated arsenals it possesses, but could also include geographical factors that may entangle it with the territorial or resource claims of other states, and reduce or affect its own resources. Likewise, a security challenged state could be one with a deficiency in natural defenses and a weak economic base, making it vulnerable to exploitation by any potential aggressor state.

This paper contends that the vulnerability of a state to the impacts of natural hazards, and its ability to overcome these impacts, is viewed from both geographical and governance factors. While a particular geographical location predisposes a state to certain hazards such as typhoons and earthquakes, the governance part can be an opportunity to overcome the challenges it poses. This paper also proposes to consider the presence of external parties such as foreign volunteers and donors who are willing to help save lives and promote development as part of the expanded definition of governance that goes beyond borders.

The use of humanitarianism has long been part of the lexicon of states, which has in fact become one of the most profound conceptual and idealist responses demonstrated by the international community to critical junctures in history that involved helping people live and survive. While its adoption has not been easy given the debates on how to operationalize the concept and to blend with the ideological and political realities prevailing during the 20th century, certain small security challenged states such as the Philippines, has pursued its foreign policy towards humanitarianism early on when it opened its doors to the



1,300 Jews coming from several countries in Europe during the holocaust in the 1930s. This happened when no country wanted to give them refuge because of fear and possible political backlash. In 1948, the Philippines, consistent with its previous position to provide a home for the Jewish people, voted in favor of the establishment of an independent state for Israel in the United Nations despite the strong pressure from several sectors to decide otherwise. In fact, it was the only Asian country that voted for UN Resolution 181 to establish an independent nation for the Jewish people. Such decision was articulated despite the looming risks of oil and trade sanctions coming from Arab oil rich countries that could paralyze then the fragile economy of the country and face possible protests from some militant Muslim sectors inside and outside of its territory.

Just after a decade when the Philippines was still reeling from the devastation of the Second World War, and when its rehabilitation was just taking off, it readied its military and several civilian contingents to support the call of the United Nations to help restore freedom and safety of the Korean people during the 1957 Korean Peninsula War. This bold response of the Philippines in sending the 4th largest national contingent during the Korean War was not without political and economic risks. Identifying itself with the cause for freedom at the expense of those powerful proponents of communism in the region is a lure to intensify support for the Maoist-inspired insurgency problem in the country. After the end of that War which lasted for several years, the Filipinos stayed on to provide support in the rehabilitation process of South Korea.

The Jewish people, together with their descendants who reached their way to the Philippines and survived the holocaust, the Israelis who are now in their own homeland and still continue to face the daunting challenges of an independent nation, and the South Koreans who are basking in the rewards of being a free and progressive state despite the backdrop of a tension-filled Korean Peninsula, have not forgotten the humanitarian efforts of the Filipinos in their nations' struggle for acceptance and survival.

It can be thought of that the valuable lessons generated from those past events may have dissipated from the memory of the many, with the passage of



time. However, when the Philippines suffered from the most damaging natural disaster in November 8, 2013 with the onslaught of typhoon Haiyan, the deadliest typhoon recorded in modern history, the Jewish communities in several parts of the globe, the Israel and the South Korean governments have come to the aid of the Filipinos, particularly in areas that were greatly affected. The South Koreans had to extend their presence in Leyte for more than a year after Haiyan in order to continue serving the needy in the provinces. They did all these because they remember the nation that helped them during those most difficult moments when very few offered support. They remember the lessons from the painful periods in history, and how they have triumphed because of the courage and compassion by a nation to help them. Volunteers from different generations and service personnel from grateful nations are now reciprocating this courage and compassion to help others in need.

Further, the responses of Israel, the Jewish communities, and the South Koreans after the typhoon Haiyan, have transcended beyond the usually politically tempered inter-state relations by creating more impact on peoples, learning each other's cultures, and forging friendships.

II. **Towards Building a Framework**

Along the discussions, the three (3) most devastating events in the 20th and 21st century (Holocaust, Korean War, Typhoon Haiyan) resulted to a tremendous number of deaths caused by human actions and by acts of nature. These are cataclysmic events that have caused extreme sufferings and wide spread destruction among the countries concerned. While the holocaust, the Korean War and Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) are reminders of how nations can bow down to devastating forces that can debilitate their capacity to live, these same situations have showcased how people can find hope and support from other people, who like them are also limited by numerous natural, political, military and economic factors. As previously discussed, this act to protect and support the lives of people in countries with desperate needs becomes the impetus to adopt reciprocity. In the past, debates were generated on how to



operationalize humanitarianism. Some would consider it as charity or philanthropy, while others would commonly view it as an obligation. However, the common limitation for the two (2) perspectives is, both are taken with reservation and disdain.

According to Michael Walzer, “humanitarian aid is obviously a good thing, an effort to relieve human suffering and save lives, an act of international benevolence.” But there is a puzzle here, for helping people in desperate need is something that we ought to do; it would be wrong not to do it -- in which case it is more like justice than benevolence. Words such as "charity" and "philanthropy" describe a voluntary act, a matter of kindness rather than duty. But international humanitarianism seems more like duty than kindness, or maybe it is a combination: two in one, a gift that we have to give (Walzer, 2011).” In the context of inter-state relations, which is a political act in itself, the performance of any humanitarian support is a choice by the state and at times is dictated by national interests and political realities. Such support is sometimes hard to come by when a supposed needy state is perceived as a threat or an enemy of the probable donor state.

In other cases, the possibility of facing sanctions from the perceived opponents of the recipient state against the donor state is also a serious concern. However, allowing the state to view humanitarianism along the prism of international political dynamics, may eventually restrain a state to extend aid and support to a needy nation, or a particular group of people. To put primacy in saving lives from natural catastrophes, or from human acts that lead to genocide, any aid or appropriate support must be extended, for as long as the consent of the nation being supported is given. This would be a different matter when the state itself becomes the aggressor of its own people. In such a case, the United Nations (UN) must collectively decide an intervention needed to save lives.

Even in the UN, defining when to help or to give support is never easy. Several times, the UN has been accused of inaction, or acting too late in cases involving saving people’s lives. Just like any groupings of states, UN has its own issues to contend with. Another hindrance is whether to consider



humanitarianism as a form of benevolence or an obligation of any state, being then a member of the community nations. In humanitarianism, there is no other compelling reason for action other than the aim to save and support life regardless of the conditions or pressures that are prevailing at a given time. Either way, humanitarianism possesses both the aspect of being benevolent and compassionate, and at the same time, an obligation towards a natural right which is to support life. At times, the difficulty in balancing intervening factors or interests, compassion, benevolence, and other similar concepts become the defining factor for humanitarianism. While this attempt to characterize humanitarianism at certain points may be a futile act, it is being offered that humanitarianism has to be viewed as either benevolence or obligation, if not both.

For purposes of this paper, the definition of Jennifer Goetz on compassion as “concern for another person's or people's suffering or need accompanied by a subsequent desire to alleviate the suffering ” is being adopted. Goetz further added that there are specific conditions in which people will be more likely to feel compassion; that there are differences in individual propensities to feel compassion; and that many people and cultures may view compassion as a basic human value. As important concepts relevant to humanitarianism, compassion and benevolence have been the bases to a number of idealist pronouncements in the UN, the Vatican and in the foreign policies of several states.

The more recent known positive responses of the international community to the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, earthquake in Japan, health crisis in Africa, and in the super typhoons that affected the Philippines and Vanuatu, to name a few, present how compassion and benevolence can form part in the discourse of humanitarianism and in the development agenda of states. However, it is observed that the challenge to consciously integrate in the foreign policies of states and development agendas of international organizations the importance of humanitarianism in the relations of states will be a meaningful and significant attempt to the change of its conduct---- that is to put people and life as



the center of world affairs.

In order for humanitarianism to take form, a transformational nature in the relations of states will be imperative. In the past, transformational diplomacy was articulated and championed by former United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to reinvigorate American foreign policy and the United States Foreign Service. As Secretary of State, Rice proposed the expansion of democratic governments. Rice stated that the September 11, 2001 attacks were rooted in “oppression and despair” and so, the U.S. must advance democratic reforms and support basic rights throughout the greater Middle East.[1] Rice has also reformed and restructured the department, as well as U.S. diplomacy as a whole. "Transformational Diplomacy" is the goal, which Rice describes as "work[ing] with our many partners around the world... [and] build[ing] and sustain[ing] democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system." [2] (Wikipedia).

While the above pronouncements can generally speak well for the U.S national interests, certain features such as “ building and sustaining democratic states” may be limiting and too ideological for some. The intent to respond to the needs of the people might be categorized as those from the allied or non-allied states. If the reading and understanding of Rice’s foreign policy is correct, this could discriminate those who are perceived to be non-allies of the U.S. More importantly, the purpose to put primacy on saving lives and promoting the well-being of the people beyond any political and ideological considerations will be prejudiced.

Further, it is feared that such views will create more pockets of crises areas that are not well responded to, and could cause further distancing, or alienation of states that are not allies. Peace then becomes more elusive if states continue to put more conditions and criteria before any humanitarian support is extended. Similarly, those people who are not closely associated with democracy, could face a more turbulent situation in times of crisis, with the



absence of support from U.S and non-allied states. In effect, this will only increase suspicions and change little the way states relate with each other.

For this paper, “transformational” concept is defined as to help save lives, restore the dignity, and enhance the well-being of those people in need beyond the political, cultural, religious, racial and ideological considerations. This definition values the building of understanding between citizens and communities that could help deepen the relations of nations.

A case in point is the experience of the Filipinos when the Koreans and the Jewish communities came to the country after Typhoon Haiyan. This is an example of how humanitarianism has enriched friendships between and among peoples. This further demonstrates the transcendence process in doing inter-state relations when its actors, commonly the national decision -makers and representatives, share consciously or unconsciously with other actors who are mostly from the civil society, to fulfill their objective in carrying out humanitarian aid. It is through the collaborative work of the donors and the recipient communities that the realization of the mutual interests of states is realized. Moreover, this also describes the evolving role of the people to participate in the transformational inter-state relations wherein the best results are seen and felt by the people themselves; the restoration of their rightful dignity and development that were reduced by human and nature-induced disasters.

In this paper, a security challenged state is a condition wherein political, defense, geography, natural hazards, natural resource, culture, religion and economic factors have limited the capacity of a state to satisfy its national goals to promote and protect life, and to maintain the sovereignty and well- being of the people at a given period. It is important to remember that in order for a state to be considered as security challenged, it must not be the aggressor or the party that provoked conflict.

In the case of natural hazards, being in the “ring of fire (earthquakes) and typhoon belt” presents a continuing threat to life and property, as well as diminishes the well-being of anyone at any given time. While the onslaught of natural hazards is beyond the capacity of humans to prevent, responses to



lessen their negative impact on people may be considered, along science and the governance framework.

As shown by the cases discussed in the paper, the condition of being a security challenged state will not, and is not a hindrance to embrace and engage in humanitarianism. As earlier presented, the lessons to welcome strangers in need are being reciprocated. The conduct of helping people in the villages has established a new face in inter-state relations as it showed how peoples from different nations could demonstrate reciprocity and upholds the similarity of purpose to save lives. As experienced in typhoon Haiyan, people in the affected villages have come to appreciate deeply the presence of the Koreans and the Jews while at the same time, learning about their culture, stories of struggle, and to a certain extent, their language. Before leaving Leyte, the Koreans left a “commemorative park” that serves as a reminder of the long friendship and reciprocal humanitarianism demonstrated by both the Philippines and Korea.

Conclusion

As shown, reciprocity has become the functional and sustaining norm in keeping the practice of rendering service, or offering help to others. Compassion begets compassion, and sacrifice received is sacrifice given back. This reflects a powerful normative value being formed between and among states that could serve as a security support to reduce or thwart an existing crises even without necessarily being allies.

The lessons learned, as presented in the paper, demonstrate the resolve to strengthen the interconnectivity of people through humanitarian efforts, which can become a source of security and resilience in the midst of crises and disasters. Moreover, the capacity of a state to engage in a humanitarian work need not be based on its being a powerful or being an ally to the other state in need, but by its clear intent to extend support to any country in distress. Foreign policies on the other hand can be an instrument in protecting the lives of the vulnerable particularly those facing human and natural disasters. Any support extended must transcend any political, cultural, ethnic, religious and economic



considerations. The primacy of life and the well-being of people must be a universal concern that is reflected in the conduct of inter-state relations and people to people relations.

As presented, there is indeed hope in building a more secured future when states and people are more interdependent and show compassion with each other. Compassion or an act of kindness is never forgotten; it is remembered and relived.

References

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