India Has Role as Regional Power in Tsunami Relief

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In nation after nation, the tsunami that ravaged South Asia last month laid bare the gaps between developing-world governments’ aspirations and their realities. In Thailand, as Joshua Kurlantzick reported in The New Republic several [months] ago, the actions of the government in the minutes after the tsunami began were tragically incompetent—and they were followed by days and weeks in which relief efforts were plagued by poor coordination and shortages of basic equipment. In the city of Banda Aceh, according to a piece by Rachel Louise Snyder, the Indonesian army and a rebel group “continue to fight through the devastation.” Meanwhile, in the same region, writes Andrew Marshall in [the February 1 issue of The New Republic Online], endemic corruption threatens to hobble relief work.

But for India, the opposite has been true. The country—which suffered more than 15,000 deaths in the southern coastal state of Tamil Nadu and the Andaman Islands chain in the northeastern Indian Ocean—has a civilian bureaucracy with a much-deserved reputation as slothful and hidebound. On this occasion, however, Indian bureaucrats belied every popular stereotype. Within hours after the tsunami hit, officials in India’s Ministry of External Affairs were on the phone with their American, Japanese, and Australian counterparts, negotiating a division of labor: India would concentrate on providing assistance to its most immediate neighbors, such as Sri Lanka, freeing others to focus on more distant areas.

India is still considered by most observers to be part of the “developing world,” a group of countries that frequently depend on assistance from others. But the day after the tsunami, India became the leading regional provider of assistance to others. The country’s surprising reaction to the tsunami may signal its coming of age as a regional and even global power—with significant consequences for South Asia and beyond.

Within 48 hours after the waves hit—and despite the near-total destruction of India’s only Integrated Defense Command (linking the army, navy, and air force) in the Andaman Islands—some 8,000 members of India’s armed forces were fanning out to the affected areas of India and its neighbors. Apart from addressing the needs of homeless and bereaved fishermen in Tamil Nadu, they swiftly reached Sri Lanka, a country that has had a tortured relationship with India over the past few decades. On this occasion, however, the Sri Lankan regime did not look askance at the Indian humanitarian effort; instead it publicly welcomed the arrival of the substantial Indian relief contingent. The Indian Navy dispatched two hospital ships to Banda Aceh, Indonesia (it was the first time India has sent a hospital ship abroad), and provided several transport aircraft, a tanker, and a hydrologic survey vessel to the tiny island chain of the Maldives. Even Thailand, a far more prosperous nation, was the recipient of substantial Indian medical and emergency assistance.

What does all this mean geopolitically? First, there is the fact that the left-of-center Congress Party-led government willingly worked with the United States in responding to the tsunami. In the past, such a regime would have gone to great lengths to torpedo any American effort to provide relief in the region.

India Studies Program Has Moved

In August 2005, Indiana University’s India Studies Program moved its offices.

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For example, when a massive cyclone hit Bangladesh in 1991, leaving extensive devastation in its wake, India expressed misgivings about the U.S. response, which was called "Operation Sea Angel." These anxieties, a product of the cold-war years, have steadily dissipated over the past decade, replaced by a willingness to work with, and even court, the United States on a range of issues, from antipiracy operations in the Indian Ocean to jointly confronting terrorism. Indeed, the growing scope of military-to-military contacts between the two countries over the past several years (a centerpiece of the new Indo-U.S. relationship) made it possible for the two states to play a leading and coordinated role in post-tsunami relief. To be sure, the countries remain at odds over certain issues, such as India's ties to Iran and the brutal regime in Myanmar. But the signs point in a positive direction. For example, in a sharp departure from the past, the ongoing U.S. military presence in Sri Lanka to provide humanitarian assistance has not elicited any visceral, reflexive comments from New Delhi officials. The latent suspicion of all American initiatives in the region that until recently preoccupied India's foreign policy elite now appears to be in steady decline.

There are also regional ramifications to consider. India's willingness and ability to mobilize its civilian and military resources to assist Sri Lanka and the Maldives have not gone unnoticed. Most of the small South Asian states have long perceived India to be at best overbearing and at worst a regional bully. India's efforts to rush emergency assistance to Sri Lanka and its subsequent withdrawal of military forces when they were no longer needed has likely impressed India's neighbors (with the exception of Pakistan). It may be mere coincidence, but Nepal finally signed a much-needed and long-delayed extradition treaty with India barely a month after the tsunami relief efforts were undertaken. And Bangladesh, which has long resisted a proposal for a gas pipeline linking itself to India and Myanmar, abruptly reversed its position in mid-January.

Of course, as India's behemoth bureaucracy returns to dealing with more mundane tasks, as disputes arise again with the United States, and as the memory of the post-tsunami relief efforts fades, we may see a return to a less self-confident and more self-centered India. It is equally possible, however, that we have just witnessed the birth of a regional leader.