

Soft Power and Disaster Diplomacy: A Case Study of India's Operation Dost

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to evaluate the potential of disaster diplomacy in improving political ties as well as transform the image of a country. This paper will discuss the impact of India providing swift humanitarian aid to an earthquake - hit Türkiye in February, 2023. It is during times of natural disasters, pandemics and famines that the impact of disaster diplomacy on foreign policy implications can be assessed fairly objectively. In other words, this paper attempts to explore the importance of disaster diplomacy and how it fits within the soft power narrative of India's foreign policy goals in the international system, especially how it will shape future political ties with Türkiye. Since there is barely any academic research done on Operation Dost, there is a gap in academic literature on the topic. This paper aims to start the discourse until more scholarly work is done in the future to record the long - term impacts of the same.*

Keywords: disaster diplomacy, soft power, India - Türkiye relations, humanitarian aid, Operation Dost

1. Introduction

For a case study that is as recent as less than 6 months, it has been extremely hard to find academic research on the title of this paper. There is a plethora of research papers that delve deeply into disaster diplomacy or disaster theories, analysing various humanitarian aid operations around the world; however, to the best of my knowledge, there is barely any on *Operation Dost* on an academic research level. As recently as February of 2023, among various other countries, India dispatched humanitarian aid to Turkey's earthquake affected areas without losing a minute and the operation was called *Operation Dost* by the Indian Government, literally translated to *Operation Friend* (*the word dost means friend in Turkish as well as in Hindi*). The aim of this paper is to analyse the role India played during a time of crisis in Türkiye and how disaster diplomacy was swiftly executed and what impact it could possibly have in the foreign policy outcomes in the future of the two countries. Although relations between India and Turkey date back to ages, the modern diplomatic ties between the two countries were established for the first time after India obtained independence from the British Raj in 1947. Apart from the Kashmir issue (Turkey has expressed vocal support to Pakistan), both countries have maintained fairly amicable relations. However, economic ties between Türkiye and India have taken the centre stage of their relations in the last decades and heads of governments of both countries have visited one another from time to time for international meetings, like the G20, etc.

2. Literature Survey and Methodology

For the lack of sources as mentioned above, apart from the theoretical discussions in this paper, the events and the chronology of humanitarian aid arriving to Türkiye from India and other countries as well as the immediate aftermath of those aids, have been collected and referenced from articles of credible, international news outlets and debates as primary sources. This paper will attempt to weave the events as they occurred around a theoretical framework to arrive at

an objective appraisal of one of the most recent yet massive scale disaster diplomacy execution examples.

Disaster Diplomacy

A country can engage various instruments as soft power resources such as media, public diplomacy, educational and cultural exchange programs, aids on development of military cooperation - such as disaster aids, training and collaboration exercise, and governmental credibility in disaster management¹. A 'disaster' is defined as a situation in which hazard and vulnerability intersect leading to damage or potential damage exceeding the coping capability of those affected² without outside support (UNISDR, 2009). In her article, *Natural Disaster Management as Soft Power on Diplomacy*, Ratih Herningtyas (2018), the author describes disaster as a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community's or society's ability to cope using its own resources. However, it is worth noting that although often caused by nature, disasters can have human origins as well, for instance, global warming and nuclear holocaust. But that is not an area that this paper aims to delve into.

Apart from examining the role of disaster - related activities in international affairs and international relations, Disaster Diplomacy also assesses its role in political conflicts that do not involve more than one independent state. Disaster - related aid can be opportunities to display that cooperation can achieve surprising gains. The long - term results from targeted, shorter - term confidence building activities can be important in international affairs that can lead to improved bilateral ties between two countries. Solidarity and empathy at a time of suffering is not only an effective soft power tool

¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "The Future of Soft Power in US Foreign Policy" in Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox (ed.), *Soft power and US foreign policy: theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives*, Routledge, New York, 2010, h. 4.

² Louise K. Comfort, "Disaster: Agent of Diplomacy or Change in International Affairs?", *Disaster Journal*, 2002.

but the positive reputation thus created often bypass politics. Disaster Diplomacy also embraces a wide definition of “disaster”, not just sudden onset events such as earthquakes and floods, but also events such as famines, droughts, epidemics, and global warming.

To define and explore disaster diplomacy, the initial question asked by Ilan Kelman (2006) was “Do natural disasters induce international cooperation amongst countries that have traditionally been ‘enemies’?”³ However, although that is valid question, it can be answered differently (case specific) and not always have the same end results based on the degree of ‘enmity’ or animosity between two countries and where the political relations stand at any given point of time. In other words, countries (even traditionally animous ones) may share ebbs and flows in their relationships with one another as a result of which it is never with complete certainty that one can assert the plausible aftermath of the relations between two ‘not - so - friendly’ countries. Many stakeholders are quite aware that certain conflicts in the world, including natural disasters and climate change, cannot be resolved through sheer hard power. It is believed that soft power is a means of solving these issues. The rationale of disaster relief, apart from the obvious ethos behind it is that, aids in disaster areas have been used as a soft power measure to assert the presence of a country, regionally as well as globally.

According to Kelman (2006), disaster diplomacy has three levels at which it is carried out – government level, organization - led and people led. Furthermore, different combinations of levels can occur. Governments can deal bilaterally or multilaterally or can be brought together by organizations. Organizations might deal directly with governments or with grassroots groups. People from one state can directly approach the government of another state or national/international organizations⁴.

Furthermore, Kelman divides aid relationship into three categories for describing the form of disaster diplomacy. The first category, mutual aid, indicates that enemy states face a common threat or have been affected by the same event and aid each other as a result. The second category, combined aid, refers to enemy states coordinating aid to another state or that several states coordinate aid to a common enemy. The third aid relationship category is that of donor - recipient: one state is a donor (assisting) and one state is a recipient (assisted). (Kelman (2006)) In this paper, we shall examine the third, where India is the donor and Turkiye, the recipient.

Earthquake - hit Turkiye and Operation Dost

On Feb.6, 2023, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale, the deadliest in the history of modern Turkiye, struck at 4: 17 a. m. local time near Pazarcık City in south - central Türkiye. This earthquake was followed by

³ Ilan Kelman and Theo Koukis, eds., “Disaster Diplomacy,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2000): 214-294.

⁴Ilan Kelman and Theo Koukis, eds., “Disaster Diplomacy,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2000): 214-292.

a second earthquake of magnitude 7.5 at 1: 24 p. m. with the epicenter in the city of Elbistan. The tremors from these two earthquakes were felt as far away as Syria, Cyprus, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Israel.

The affected areas in Turkey were in shambles, the eventual death toll estimated at over 50, 000 and more than 100, 000 injured, needless to state that hundreds of thousands of people were left homeless in cold weather conditions. According to the estimates of the World Bank's Global Rapid Post - Disaster Damage Estimation (GRADE) report, 1.25 million people were made homeless by damage to their homes, or their complete collapse. Inevitably, Turkiye was not in a position to handle the aftermath of the earthquakes single - handedly and the world witnessed how nations came together to help and aid Turkiye by providing for humanitarian aid and medical supplies in the following days.

India was the first responder in reaching ground zero where the earthquakes hit, despite being more than 4600 kms away from Turkiye. The capacities of India's humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) institutionalised in the wake of the 2011 tsunami disaster that struck multiple locations around Asia, tying into its diplomacy have grown significantly since its initial days. In the recent decades, India's HADR has provided prompt humanitarian aid and emerged as a responsible global actor during the Pakistan Floods (2022), Afghanistan Famine (2022), Ukraine War (Operation Ganga, 2022), Yemen Airlift (2015), Nepal Earthquake (2015), Sri Lanka (2004) and several other United Nations Peace Keeping in Congo, Sudan, etc.

The time taken between Prime Minister Narendra Modi extending condolences to the bereaved families and ‘India stands in solidarity with the people of Turkey and is ready to offer all possible assistance to cope with this tragedy⁵’, and mobilising aid for Turkiye was quick, as NDRF teams along with Indian Air Force C - 17s made multiple trips to deliver aid, search teams, setup field hospitals, and so on. It is noteworthy to mention that the importance of quick disaster aid response can never be over - emphasised because the initial hours after any injury/disaster are aptly alluded to as the Golden Hours in medicine. It is the window of opportunity when lives can actually be saved before it is too late.

According to Turkish envoy Firat Sunel, India was among the first countries to help earthquake - hit Turkey⁶. On the evening of 6 February 2023, the Indian government sent National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) squads for rescue operations in affected areas of Turkey. The Indian Air Force

⁵Devika Bhattacharya, "India to dispatch rescue teams, relief materials to quake-hit Turkey, Syria: PMO" India Today,(February 6,2023), retrieved June 29, 2023, from <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/turkey-syria-earthquake-india-to-send-rescue-teams-medical-aid-relief-materials-pmo-2331072-2023-02-06>.

⁶Manjiri Chitre, "Turkey thanks India for sending assistance after earthquake: 'Friend in need...'"Hindustan Times, (February 7,2023), retrieved June 29,2023, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/turkey-thanks-india-for-sending-assistance-after-earthquake-friend-in-need-101675766400213.html>.

sent a C - 17 to Adana with 47 personnel from the NDRF, 3 senior officers, and a specially trained dog squad. Accompanying personnel were necessary equipment, including medical supplies, drilling machines and other equipment required for the aid efforts⁷. India also provided Garuda Aerospace's Droni drones to the most earthquake ravaged areas to identify those trapped under rubble and debris, along with modified Kisan drones carrying medications, food, Collapsed Structure Search and Rescue (CSSR) and supplies⁸. On the following day, on 7 February 2023, the Indian Air Force sent two more C - 17 aircraft to Turkey. These two flights contained relief supplies, a mobile hospital, and additional specialized search - and - rescue teams⁹. Along with NDRF personnel, the Agra - based Army Field Hospital dispatched 89 medical staff. The medical team includes both critical care specialists and general physicians, with access to X - ray machines, ventilators, an oxygen generation plant, cardiac monitors, and associated equipment to set up a 30 bedded medical facility¹⁰. On 12 February 2023, the Ministry of External Affairs of India announced that the 7th flight from the Indian Air Force (IAF) landed at the Adana Airport in Turkey, carrying medical equipment like patient monitors, and ECG machines. It also carried disaster relief material and supplies for rescue teams on the ground. Indian Medical personnel team returned to India on 20 February 2023 after successfully built and ran field hospital in İskenderun region of Turkey¹¹.

Now that we have briefly summarised the aid offered to Turkey by India at a time of dire need, let us now discuss the underlying political nuances of this whole operation and what it means for both countries. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Turkey's President Erdoğan has voiced his support for Pakistan on several occasions in international events which has over time, disenchanted the Indian side since the Kashmir issue is one of the most sensitive topic in Indian politics. However, economic and

trade ties between the two countries are more robust than ever before in history. India - Türkiye bilateral trade has grown over the past 15 years to cross US\$10.70 billion in 2021 - 22. This is growth from 2018, when bilateral trade reached US\$8.7 billion (a 22% increase at the time). In 2018, Turkish exports to India amounted to US\$1.2 billion while imports from India totaled US\$7.5 billion¹².

Let us now discuss what both countries stand to gain from India's disaster diplomacy gesture. To start with, this could lead to a diplomatic reset between the India and Türkiye, and can help consolidate the existing, booming economic ties. Türkiye might expect to see a steady rise in the number of Indian tourists visiting Türkiye in the aftermath of a diplomatic reset and vice - versa. Consequently, people - to - people ties may improve between the two countries. When the rescue teams were in earthquake ravaged parts of Türkiye, there were dozens (if not hundreds) of photos and live broadcasting of the local Turkish citizens thanking and praising the personnel of the Indian army helping them not only with emergency make - shift hospitals but also having saved a 6 year old Turkish girl by the name of Beren in Gaziantep from under the rubbles¹³. There is a famous photograph of a Turkish elderly woman hugging and giving a peck to an Indian army doctor (also a woman) to thank the latter for her field hospital services in earthquake ravaged Hatay¹⁴.

Not that Turkey and India were on inimical terms prior to these events, but moving forward one cannot help but wonder if, after all, India would be seen in a new light - as much a better a friend, than previously assumed by the Turkish government. Consequently, differences of the past could be put aside in order to work on building improved bilateral ties between the two countries with a renewed level of trust.

India, however, stands to gain a lot more than the possibility of a diplomatic reset. Firstly, by being the first responder to the earthquakes in Turkey, India has exhibited consistency, since it has been doing so during emergencies in the past. Making the right move at the right time is what makes India's diplomacy a proactive one at that. Interestingly, it is a great demonstration of military capability (even though disaster diplomacy is the end goal) by mobilizing transporters, field hospitals and technical teams in no time traversing thousands of kilometers. Secondly, the Middle East is a critical source of investment, energy and

⁷ ANI, "Turkey earthquake: 1st Indian IAF plane reaches Adana with relief material" www.business-standard.com. (February 7, 2023), retrieved June 29, 2023 from https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/turkey-earthquake-1st-indian-iaf-plane-reaches-adana-with-relief-material-123020700520_1.html

⁸ Sangeetha Kandavel, "Drones from Tamil Nadu head to Turkey for rescue efforts, medicine supply" *The Hindu*, ISSN 0971-751X (February 8, 2023), retrieved June 30, 2023, from

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/drones-from-tamil-nadu-head-to-turkey-for-rescue-operations/article66484987.ece>.

⁹ Press Trust of India, "2 Indian Air Force Planes Land In Earthquake-Hit Turkey With Medical Teams" *NDTV.com*, (February 7, 2023), retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/2-indian-air-force-planes-land-in-earthquake-hit-turkey-with-medical-teams-3761849>.

¹⁰ Livemint, "Turkey earthquake: Indian Army dispatches 89-member medical team", *mint*, (February 7, 2023), retrieved June 30, 2023 from <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/turkey-earthquake-indian-army-dispatches-89-member-medical-team-11675755012174.html>.

¹¹ Press Trust of India, "Our Duty To Help..." PM Modi Tells Rescue Teams Back From Turkey" *NDTV.com*, (February 20, 2023), retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-interacts-with-relief-teams-involved-in-operation-dost-in-turkey-syria-3798856>.

¹² Melissa Cyril, "India-Türkiye Bilateral Trade and Investment Profile" India Briefing, (August 24, 2022), retrieved June 5, 2023, from <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/india-turkey-bilateral-trade-and-investment-profile-25708.html/>.

¹³ Taniya Dutta, "Girl, 6, pulled alive from Turkey earthquake rubble by Indian rescue team", (February 10, 2023), retrieved June 5, 2023 from <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/2023/02/10/girl-6-pulled-alive-from-turkey-earthquake-rubble-by-indian-rescue-team/>.

¹⁴ Kanishka Singharia, "In heart-warming gesture, Turkish lady kisses Indian Army woman personnel", *Hindustan Times*, (February 9, 2023), retrieved June 5, 2023 from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-heart-warming-gesture-turkish-lady-kisses-indian-army-woman-personnel-101675955145054.html>.

remittances for India. Hence, it only makes sense that India's interests and security concerns are not left unguarded. Indian foreign policy and diplomatic maturity has won India an image of reliability, especially during crisis situations. Diplomacy is not a zero - sum game for India.

The relevance of Operation Dost can be better comprehended under the Soft Power theory supported by Joseph S. Nye, Jr (2004) in his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Nye divided power into hard power and soft power. He explained why soft power is a crucial element in foreign policy and international relations and why it cannot be ignored¹⁵. Nye explains that the resources that can help identify a country's soft power include its culture, values and its policies (where they are perceived as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others)¹⁶. While it may not be directly related to our topic of discussion, it would be unfair not to mention that Bollywood and Yoga have a substantial presence and following in Türkiye, as is evident from hundreds of Yoga studios and Bollywood fan meet ups in Türkiye. Although Bollywood and Yoga were never an intentional soft power tool for India, in the recent decades the Indian government have overtly invested in promoting both internationally. This is to bring to light that while India already has a positive presence in these sectors in Türkiye, Operation Dost has paved the way forward to consolidate India's presence in the minds of Turkish citizens for the near future (or even further).

3. Conclusion

This paper has summarised the current view of disaster diplomacy, providing a fresh case study and then interpreted the refined theoretical understanding for policy makers of both Türkiye and India. The significance of this work is in assessing a standard humanitarian assumption that an immediate response to a disaster is solely an ethical desire to help and to work together. The reality is that, in the global political realm, a variety of considerations can be prioritised by the assisting country other than providing as much aid and assistance as possible to those in need at the soonest. Ilan Kelman (2016) argues that instances of successful disaster diplomacy have not yet occurred and that it is unlikely to occur, if solely based on disaster related activities, thus contradicting a number of media and humanitarian assumptions that heads of states would desire and consequently seek disaster diplomacy actively¹⁷.

Although it is worth noting that much evidence remains to be collected, particularly in terms of long - term impacts within the realm of disaster diplomacy, it is safe to concede that Operation Dost was an opportunity that India acted upon with finesse, no matter the actual rationale behind it. Louise Comfort holds the view that, "Disaster tends to

¹⁵ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "Soft power: The means to success in world politics", *Public Affairs*, New York, 2004.

¹⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "The Future of Soft Power in US Foreign Policy" in, Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox (ed.), *Soft power and US foreign policy: theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives*, Routledge, New York, 2010.

¹⁷ Ilan Kelman, "Catastrophe and conflict: Disaster diplomacy and its foreign policy implications", *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 1(1), 1-76, 2016

shatter existing norms and practices among states, creating an opportunity for fresh recognition of the fragility of life and common humanity that bond all people" therefore "shared risks lead to shared responsibilities" (Comfort, 2010, p.1)¹⁸. While it is true that given India's record for proving aid during international crisis has not gone unnoticed over the last few decades, it is not solely for the purpose of political or diplomatic gains, as lending a help to those in need is ingrained in the Indian ethos. For instance, India is the host for the 18th G20 Heads of State and Government Summit and the theme announced by Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi, as stated in the official G20 website is "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" or "One Earth · One Family · One Future". It is derived from the ancient Sanskrit text of the *Maha Upanishad*. The theme affirms the value of all forms of life – human, plant, animal, and micro - organisms – and their interrelation on planet Earth and in the wider cosmos. The theme conveys a powerful message of India's G20 Presidency, which is of striving for just and equitable growth for all in the world, in a holistic, sustainable, responsible, and inclusive manner. They represent a uniquely Indian approach to India's G20 Presidency, of living in harmony with the surrounding ecosystem¹⁹.

4. Future Scope

As to the question of how long does the humanitarian aid stay in the recipients' minds, only time can tell, since this case - study is one that is relatively fresh at the moment of writing this paper. In the long run, for actively directing foreign policy, disaster diplomacy cannot be relied on to shape everlasting connections or to establish unprecedented fundamental progress, but disaster - related activities can go a long way for driving forward policy goals which already exist for non - disaster related objectives. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the current lack of academic literature available on this case study has inevitably limited this research. In the future, when more scholarly work is put into India's Operation Dost in Turkey, a clearer picture of the discussions of this paper can be analysed. Time will only reveal if the operation shall go down in history as the turning point of India - Türkiye relations or if it will be overshadowed by differences between the two.

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¹⁸ Louise K. Comfort, "Disaster: Agent of Diplomacy or Change in International Affairs", *Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh*, 2010

¹⁹ <https://www.g20.org/en/g20-india-2023/logo-theme/>

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