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An Analysis of ASEAN's Cyclone Nargis 2008 Disaster Diplomacy

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Abstract

Cyclone Nargis in 2008 is remembered as one of the deadliest disasters of modern Southeast Asia. Myanmar suffered the greatest losses of the states in the region, with more than a hundred thousand deaths and millions affected. The present research examines the events of the storm in a disaster diplomacy context. The methodological framework of the study is the Complex Adaptive System, which is applied through four properties and three mechanisms. According to the results, Cyclone Nargis hit the region in a cold international environment, and its treatment ended with a (to some extent) successful regional diplomatic outcome after easing the initial abstention. Among the variables of the CAS method, nonlinearity and aggregation, as well as internal model and building blocks, determined regional cooperation. The present case study shows that an extremely severe natural disaster is capable of promoting regional cooperation despite the actual cold political environment.

Keywords

CAS method – Cyclone Nargis – disaster diplomacy – Myanmar – tropical storm – typhoon

1 Introduction

Cyclone Nargis was the first named storm of the 2008 North Indian Ocean cyclone season, wreaking havoc across South and Southeast Asia. Of all the Bay of Bengal countries hit by the cyclone, Southeast Asia's westernmost state, Myanmar — previously known as Burma — suffered the most, with more than a hundred thousand deaths (Guha-Sapir et al., n.d.). The resulting situation significantly challenged Naypyidaw and the most important regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Since then, the event and its management have been considered controversial: Southeast Asian states and supranational organizations refer to it as a success regarding disaster management collaboration, while the international — primarily Western — media saw it as a failure of the reigning Myanmar regime. According to Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan, ASEAN got “baptized” by Cyclone Nargis in 2008 despite the enormous devastation and destruction. According to his claim, such an ambitious and large-scale undertaking has never been carried out before (Jorde, 2009: p. 7). At the same time, Tim Costello, the head of World Vision Australia, stated that the military junta in Myanmar did not allow NGOs distributing aid to prevail, thus making humanitarian work impossible (Bergin, 2008).

The case has been widely discussed by ASEAN (TCG, 2009; Jorde, 2010) and other international organizations (Creach and Fan, 2008; IFRC, 2011). Furthermore, the academic world has also approached the topic from many perspectives, i.e., of national management (Seekins, 2008, 2009; Li et al., 2012; Pattanayak et al., 2012; Gribble, 2013; Tasnim et al., 2015; Howe and Bang, 2017; Warr and Aung, 2019) or the event's international effects (Özerdem, 2010; Loevy, 2015).

The present study conducts a regional disaster diplomacy analysis regarding Cyclone Nargis. The term covers a new academic field that examines how disasters affect international relations. As defined by Ilan Kelman (2012), all activities between nations related to disasters and disaster management are part of disaster diplomacy. However, the discipline only became widely discussed in the 2000s (Papp and Pal, 2021). Apart from Kelman, several authors write regularly on the subject, mostly preparing theoretical analyses (Kelman et al., 2006; Callaway et al., 2012) and case studies (Orillos et al., 2009; Mavrogenis and Kelman, 2013).

The present research is structured as follows. First, it details the applied theoretical and methodological framework of disaster diplomacy as well as the CAS method. It is followed by the results: the event, the circumstances

of the disaster, and its management. Then, in the discussion section, the disaster diplomacy analysis is detailed according to the variables of the CAS methodology. Finally, the study summarizes the most important points and draws conclusions.

2 Theory of Disaster Diplomacy

Disaster diplomacy is a relatively new discipline, the basic premise of which is: disaster management cooperation develops regional relations and promotes political cooperation (Petz, 2014: p. 35). As cooperative disaster relief is a task that requires close, coordinated cooperation, it clearly has a great deal of political potential (Pusterla, 2017). However, this short principle, easily understood by the academic community, needs further explanation and supplementation.

According to Feria-Miranda (1994: p. 249), in the 20th century, the political leadership worldwide recognized that the importance of emergency and disaster management was sharply increasing and that disaster risk management was also becoming part of the political practice (Shah et al., 2020). This way, disaster management processes were not only the responsibility of the disaster management professions but were also increasingly emphasized in political decision-making. According to Albrecht (2017), how a government handles disasters greatly influences political trust and culture. Thus, a catastrophe does not necessarily damage the political system but causes the government to react with its resources to manage and communicate the threat (Abney and Hill, 1966). Hollis (2018: p. 27) also points out that disaster is not an independent variable in and of itself, as it is highly dependent on economic, political, and social vulnerability. On the one hand, this new approach emphasizes disaster vulnerability, but on the other hand, it emphasizes political and social sensitivities. The phenomenon of disasters must, therefore, be examined in more depth as a kind of political event, together with its response, communication, and other long-term effects (Olson, 2000).

The history of disaster diplomacy as a phenomenon dates to the mid-20th century when various disaster events began to have a tangible impact on international relations, especially in developed countries (Clifford, 1956). However, the fact that a disaster itself is a political actor is an entirely new idea. The first such approach was born in the 1960s (Abney and Hill, 1966), where the authors applied a disaster approach different from before. Since then, the scholarship has developed, and various theoretical and methodological frameworks got integrated.

At present, Ilan Kelman (2007a,b, 2011, 2012) is considered the most respected researcher in this still under-discussed area as per published peer-reviewed literature (Papp and Pal, 2021). According to him, all transnational activities related to disasters and disaster management are part of disaster diplomacy (Kelman, 2012: p. 12). Werker (2010: p. 3) argues that disasters bring opposing parties together, albeit for a shorter period. However, this principle is refuted by the events observed so far, which explain that during disasters, even if the relations between the states concerned are conducive, mutual information retention is typical. Even after the incident, the blame on the other party may even worsen. For example, the former can be observed between India, China, and Nepal with the 2017 floods. The disaster could have been prevented if the affected states had not withheld their flood forecasting information (Adhikari, 2017). Disaster diplomacy is thus merely an opportunity to forge closer links between affected people and the risk-takers. Still, it is not self-evident that it will bring states closer to one another.

According to the scientometric analysis of the field (Papp and Pal, 2020), disaster diplomacy discourse is conducted merely in journals, with most articles appearing in the 2010s. As a new academic field, only a few authors publish on the subject, and Ilan Kelman is the most dominant scholar. However, being a multidisciplinary field, disaster diplomacy is fundamentally linked to three primary disciplines: social sciences (mainly international relations), natural sciences (earth and environmental science), and medical sciences (environmental health and health diplomacy).

3 Materials and Methods

3.1 *Methodological Problems of Disaster Diplomacy*

Disaster diplomacy is a new discipline based on several theoretical works (Pelling, 2003; Mustafa, 2004; Kelman, 2007a; Nelson, 2010; Pelling and Dill, 2010; Dahlberg et al., 2016). This theoretical basis is supported by some practical studies investigating events (Kelman, 2007b; Gaillard et al., 2008), particular geographical locations (Glantz, 1976; Mavrogenis and Kelman, 2013; Petz, 2014), or specific problems of the field (Field and Kelman, 2018; Whittaker et al., 2018). However, as the disaster diplomacy methodology is under development, only a few attempts have been made to develop a unified framework (Comfort, 2000; Kelman, 2012). As a result, there is currently no single, generally accepted methodology.

The present article applies a qualitative analysis technique through a case study and connects this empiricism with a formal method, the Complex Adaptive System (CAS). The CAS method is attributed to Holland (1995) and

can be used to examine any complex system (for example, organizations, human groups, etc.) in natural or social sciences, economics, and IT. Comfort (2000) adapted the existing framework for disaster diplomacy and expanded it with additional aspects by Kelman (2012). The focal point of the conceptual model focuses on the transition between social, economic, and political states based on continuous change. It recognizes that social systems are interconnected at different levels due to ongoing interactions with the environment, constant learning, and development.

3.2 *Application of the CAS Mmethod*

The academic literature on the CAS method focuses on two main problems: (1) the conditions of general complex systems and (2) the properties and mechanisms determining their operation (Comfort, 2000: p. 280). Accordingly, the defined variables of the method are identified as four properties — nonlinearity, diversity, flow and aggregation — and three mechanisms — tagging, internal model and building blocks.

Nonlinearity, as the first property, indicates a phenomenon where the consequences of minor changes during the system's operation differ significantly over time. This is because the components and small units of the system have a complex influence on the system as a whole (Comfort, 2000: p. 282). An excellent example of this is if a single person notices the signs of a tsunami (small component), due to which an entire stretch of the coast can be warned and evacuated in time, and thousands of lives can potentially be saved (consequence). An example of this case is the Indian Ocean tsunami in Sri Lanka, where a ten-year-old British girl recognized the approach of the disaster minutes earlier due to what she had learned in geography classes (Chapman, 2005). Nonlinearity is always present to varying degrees in disaster events, as both natural factors and participants — affected victims — operate unpredictably in this complex system.

Diversity means that individuals or units with similar characteristics react to the same effect differently, initiating new processes (Comfort, 2000: p. 282). In disaster diplomacy, "individual" refers to the actual participants, i.e., diplomats, politicians, international organizations, NGOs, the media, the private sector, and others (Kelman, 2012: p. 78). Diversity is present in all disaster events, as the same event affects individuals, communities, social dimensions, and the economic system in different ways and to different extents. In the case of the present research, this assumption is especially true since the ten ASEAN member states were affected by the same disaster event but in different ways, leading to various reactions from the states.

Flow is the third property, according to which the flow of actions, materials, ideas, and people in the same environment acts as a catalyst between

independent individuals (Comfort, 2000, p. 282). Material flow occurs when relief supplies arrive in the disaster-stricken area, and information flow can be found in social media, e-mail, telephone, or documents sent by traditional mail (Kelman, 2012, p. 79).

Aggregation shows the ability of individuals when they interact with each other according to recurring patterns for the sake of a common goal (Comfort, 2000, p. 281). Some examples are the various disaster management frameworks, i.e., when an organization — for example, the United Nations — coordinates aid according to a specific protocol. Different states then use this channel to participate in disaster diplomacy. Aggregation, therefore, represents a platform for international disaster management.

The mechanisms defined in the CAS framework are as follows. Tagging covers the connection of different units to best provide assistance, aid, or cooperation (Comfort, 2000: p. 282). This means connecting rescue teams with their specific skills and assets to the proper role for the needs at the disaster site to best utilize their expertise. In international relations, this association also means the connection of states seeking similar interests (Kelman, 2012: p. 79).

The internal model refers to the common assumptions influencing the interaction between subsystems or components of the system (Comfort, 2000: p. 283). For example, disaster diplomacy can apply this to two governments with similar ideologies, foreign policy, vision, and/or behavior toward a third party (Kelman, 2012: p. 79).

The last mechanism is building blocks. These are the units of the system being applied to create a complex system of recurring interactions — for example, steps of communication (Comfort, 2000: p. 283). In disaster diplomacy, these components can be units used in disaster management (meteorological stations) or platforms used in diplomacy (for example, official forums, anything that sends, forwards, or receives information). The meaning of building blocks is not narrowed down to specific units but their mobilization. As such, while the media's promotion of disaster protection and diplomacy is always available to states, the mechanism can be observed in their activation or lack thereof (Mavrogenis and Kelman, 2013).

Not unexpectedly, the application of the CAS method also has a few limitations, which make it difficult to isolate the research results and establish cause-and-effect relationships. For example, individual interests, individual intentions, and interests of politicians and executives greatly influence disaster diplomacy, and this is a practically undetectable and unanalyzable phenomenon. Furthermore, the analysis aspects themselves (four properties and three mechanisms in Figure 1a,b) may or may not be detectable in a physical system, but they are constantly present in international relations; only their quantity

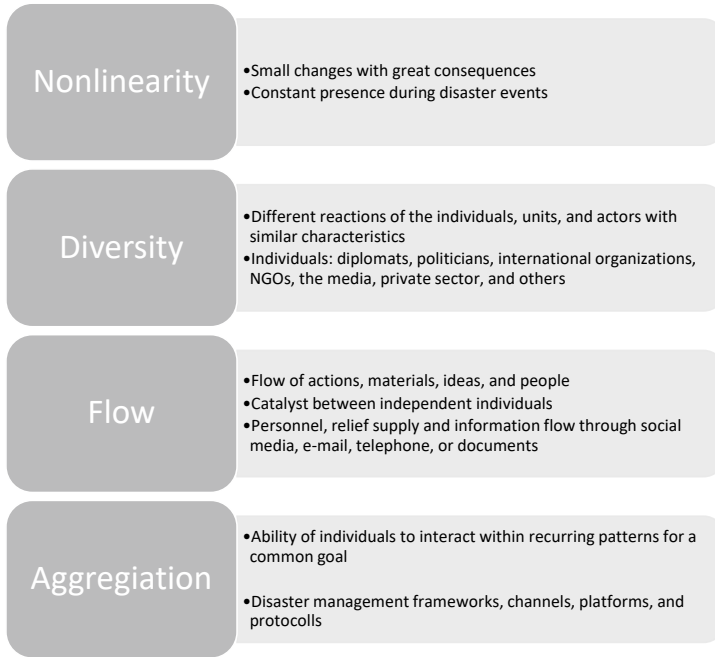


FIGURE 1A The four properties of the CAS method

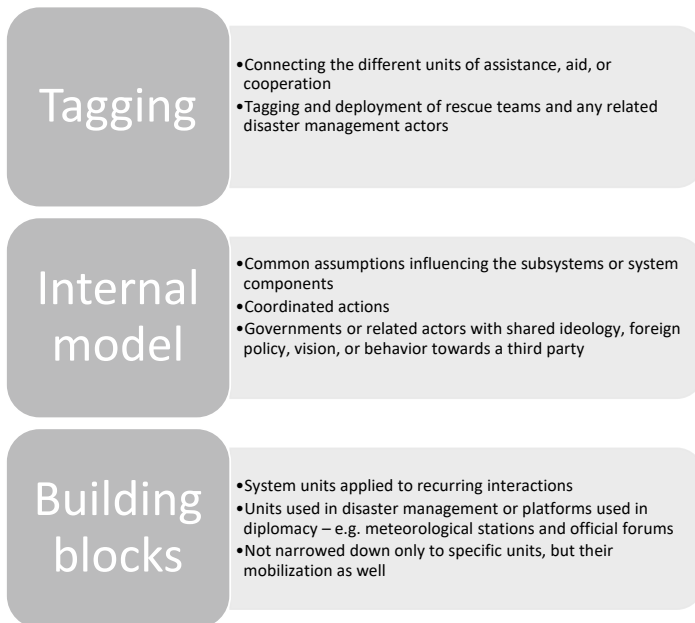


FIGURE 1B The three mechanisms of the CAS method

and quality change (Kelman, 2012: pp. 79–82). The variables' degree and other factors will determine the results to overcome this limitation in the current research, as a certain level of presence is expected to be observed continuously.

4 Results

4.1 *The Circumstances of the Event*

The region's security concept characterizes ASEAN's conflict management. The goal of regional interactions is to cooperate in confidence and remain "silent" while resolving a conflict. The ASEAN diplomacy's primary tools are preventive diplomacy, peaceful conflict management, and establishing and strengthening a relationship of trust.

Although its particular way of conflict management has been present since its initiation, significant disaster management cooperation cannot be observed prior to the 2000s. While the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Declaration on Mutual Assistance on Natural Disasters go back to 1976, besides a few disaster-related events, there were no relevant actions until 2003. The ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management was established at that time, and preparations for an action plan had begun. The common regional disaster management treaty, the Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) (ASEAN, 2005) — accepted due to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami — was finalized in 2005 and was not in force until the Philippines ratified it in 2009 (Rum, 2016).

Prior to Cyclone Nargis, the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami struck the region, causing some visible disaster diplomacy. However, as previously mentioned, the legal and institutional frameworks for disaster cooperation were still missing. Therefore, ASEAN did not collaborate during the intervention and recovery phase yet acted as part of the international community. Nevertheless, the member states participated as a united community in the negotiations after the tsunami. They followed up the events together, taking into consideration the interests of all participants and looking for a compromise solution. Overall, the 2004 disaster went down in history as one of the most devastating global events of the modern era. Although the involved states had to face many problems during disaster relief, in the following decades, the event was a successful reference in disaster management documents such as the 2018 Operationalising One ASEAN One Response. The tsunami management thus proved that the Southeast Asian states are capable of successful disaster diplomacy if necessary — especially in terms of follow-up — and this cooperation does not even require a legal and institutional framework.

ASEAN's Myanmar policy was characterized by quiet diplomacy and confidence-building in the 1990s (Ganesan, 2010; Marchi, 2017). After the country's accession in 1997, the association did not engage in open disagreements but instead tried to integrate it into the Southeast Asian community as much as possible. However, the process was interrupted by the movements associated with the 2007 Saffron Revolution, when the military regime used brutal methods against the protesting citizens. Due to the incident, the member states had mixed opinions regarding the situation of the Union of Myanmar as the regional relations grew cold (Marchi, 2014). The storm of 2008 gave ASEAN another opportunity to act together on the issue of Myanmar.

Although the country is currently in a similar situation, social care and basic services such as education and healthcare suffered from severe problems during the cyclone. Due to military expenditures and the maintenance of military administration, insufficient resources were available for society's development, making the population particularly vulnerable (Howe and Bang, 2017). In addition, regarding disaster preparedness, Myanmar suffered from fundamental deficiencies: the country did not have any disaster prevention laws or emergency management regulations (Howe and Bang, 2017). In May 2008, the cyclone struck an unprotected country that lacked a disaster prevention strategy.

4.2 *The Event*

The manifestation of tropical storms in the Pacific and Indian Oceans is called "cyclone," a widespread phenomenon around the Bay of Bengal. In Myanmar's modern history, storms of similar strength had hit the region many times, previous to Nargis in 2006 when Mara (Category 4 on the Saffir — Simpson hurricane scale) wreaked havoc (Howe and Bang, 2017).

The tropical cyclone of April 2008 also reached Category 4. The background of the event was high-pressure air currents starting in the Southern Hemisphere and crossing the equator. They picked up a considerable amount of water vapor from the Indian Ocean in the form of a strong westerly wind. Arriving in the Bay of Bengal on April 27, the process intensified, which created a perfect environment for the formation of Cyclone Nargis (Li et al., 2012). On May 2, the storm reached the southern coast of Myanmar, wreaking havoc in the Irrawaddy River Delta. The gusts of wind generated 3–4 meters high waves at the river mouth, which traveled up to a distance of 50 kilometers, causing further damage (Tasnim et al., 2015). The cyclone mainly affected the southern and southeastern divisions but also caused minor damage in the Irrawaddy riverbed (Figure 2).

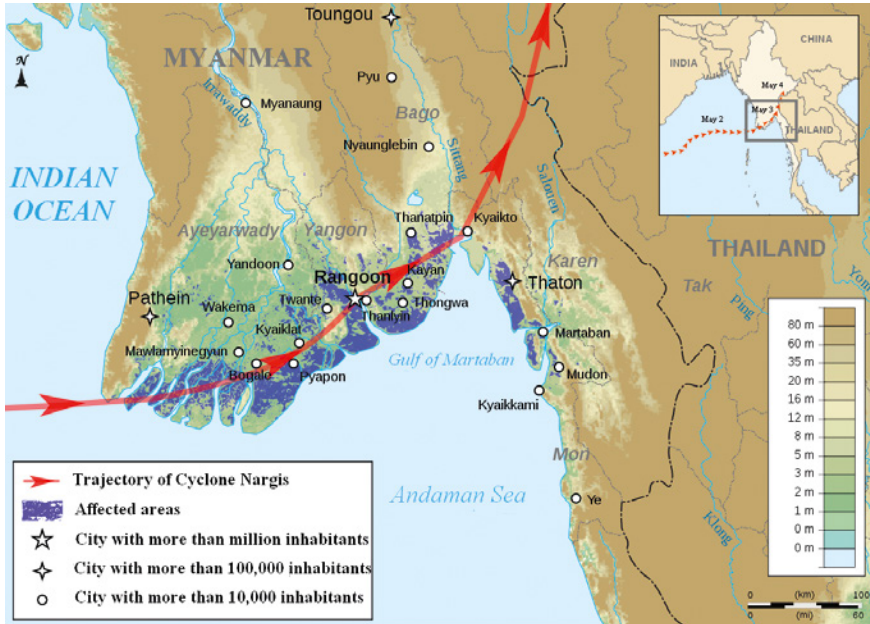


FIGURE 2 Map of the path of Cyclone Nargis. Original figure by Sémhur (2008), French terms translated by the author. The original figure was uploaded to Wikipedia under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License

Statistics on the event lack certainty, as the data collected by the Red Cross (IFRC, 2011), the UN, Sigma (Swiss Re Institute, n.d.), and the International Disaster Database (Guha-Sapir et al., n.d.) differ widely. Since Myanmar has completely refrained from providing international data (Özerdem, 2010), the numbers can only be estimated. However, since international disaster science papers are primarily based on the data of the International Disaster Database (Papp, 2019), the present research also applies that. The International Disaster Database is operated by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Université catholique de Louvain. The database contains essential core data regarding more than 22 000 disasters in the world from 1900. The database is compiled from various sources, including UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, insurance companies, research institutes, and press agencies.

In the days following the strike, international organizations received information of 84 530 deaths, while another 54 836 people were considered “missing” — however, later registered as “dead.” The population living along the Irrawaddy and Yangon rivers, an estimated 2.4 million people, were ‘affected.’

In terms of economic damage, the destruction caused by the cyclone reached 4 billion dollars. The financial losses were further aggravated by the fact that Myanmar's economy had a rising tendency. The damage caused by the storm amounted to 3% of GDP, thus breaking the previously promising trend. The natural disaster, therefore, had a long-term impact on Myanmar's economy (Turnell et al., 2009).

The damage caused by the disaster was enormous. The fatalities were concentrated in the western and central parts of the Irrawaddy Delta, mainly in rural villages with worse infrastructure than urban ones (Seekins, 2009: p. 5). According to Howe and Bang (2017), the economic damage was primarily felt in the following areas: (1) fisheries and paddy fields through food exports; (2) industrial salt production; (3) manufacture of coke extracted from mangrove wood; and (4) use of mangrove directly. Cyclone Nargis was the worst disaster in modern Myanmar, but overall, it went down in history as the second deadliest natural disaster in all of Southeast Asia.

4.3 *Disaster Management*

The cyclone started south of the equator and, moving northward, developed into a tropical storm. Two institutions predicted the phenomenon. First, on April 26, 2008, the Indian Meteorological Department indicated that a severe disturbance had been detected in the eastern Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the Hawaii-based Joint Typhoon Warning Center identified the phenomenon as a tropical storm (Kikuchi et al., 2009). Despite all this, the government of Myanmar did not take the necessary measures due to the domestic political and administrative problems mentioned previously, so the storm hit a defenseless country on May 3.

The management of the disaster was further complicated by the fact that the head of the Department of Relief and Resettlement of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement, which is responsible for disaster management, had just resigned. Consequently, the management of the cyclone was transferred to the Social Welfare Department, whose head retired just before the disaster. Therefore, the deputy head of the department was appointed as the policymaker responsible for disaster response (Warr and Aung, 2019).

Amid the chaotic situation, the military government withdrew from foreign aid. Initially, material aid — such as medicine, food, etc. — was accepted, but personal assistance was categorically refused — and this was valid not only for the military but also for civilian employees. This is particularly relevant to Asia (Cook, 2021; Gong, 2021) and was a big issue in the response to the 2015 Nepal Earthquake. The regime was generally afraid of foreigners, who were

believed to pose a threat to the political leadership, and even according to their assumptions, the information released would have portrayed Myanmar in a bad light (Seekins, 2009: p. 2). However, as the situation escalated, Asian response and recovery workers were admitted — primarily ASEAN citizens — while applications of European or UN staff members continued to be rejected (Simm, 2018). The situation was further aggravated by the government arbitrarily selecting the distribution of aid and civil protection based on wealth, ethnicity, and religion (McCarthy, 2020; Paik, 2016). As a result, poor communities, ethnic minorities, and Muslim citizens were practically ignored during the rescue and restoration process. Therefore, it can be concluded that the protection of the interests, political security, and power of the state was preferred over saving the population.

On May 5, the Secretary General of ASEAN, Surin Pitsuwan, called on the member states to act together in accordance with the provisions of the AADMER, which was not yet in force. Three days later, on May 8, the Union of Myanmar agreed to cooperate and mobilize ERAT teams (ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Teams, an international humanitarian executive staff of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance — AHA Centre) of government officials, disaster management experts, and staff from other international organizations. The first ERAT operation ever deployed was conducted from 9 to 18 May, marking a milestone in disaster management cooperation in Southeast Asia. The task of the rescue team became primarily monitoring and reconnaissance. During the ten days of deployment, the affected areas were superficially surveyed, damages were assessed, restoration needs were estimated, and the information was delivered to ASEAN (Jorde, 2010: pp. 45–47).

Based on the rescue team's report, ASEAN convened an extraordinary ministerial meeting on May 19, where an ASEAN-led coordination mechanism was set up to distribute and manage aid (Creach and Fan, 2008). Under international pressure, Myanmar agreed to form a Tripartite Core Group (TCG), which included Myanmar, ASEAN, and the UN. TCG was tasked with creating and supervising the aid mechanism (TCG, 2009).

Within a week of the strike, 24 states offered emergency aid worth about \$30 million. However, after the aid conference on May 25, significant additional donations came from worldwide, totaling \$350 million. Of this, approx. 73% came from the private sector, and the most significant state donors were the United Kingdom (USD 54 million), the USA (USD 45 million), and Australia (USD 28 million) (Jorde, 2010, p. 24). The contributions of the ASEAN countries are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Post-cyclone nargis aid of ASEAN member states

Country	Financial aid (USD)	Other aid
Brunei	1.3 million	Drinking water, food, tent, medicine
Cambodia	310 000	n.a.
Indonesia	1.8 million	Clothing, food, medicine
Laos	120 000	medical rescue team
Malaysia	1.16 million	Clothing, food, medicine, water purification tablets
Philippines	350 000	Medical emergency team, ERAT costs
Singapore	3.5 million	Psychological help, agricultural tools
Thailand	29.7 million	Two medical teams, airport coordination
Vietnam	300 000	Medical rescue team

PREPARED BY THE AUTHOR BASED ON DATA FROM THE ASEAN REPORT ON THE CYCLONE (JORDE, 2010).

Table 1 shows that all ASEAN member countries have contributed to disaster protection at some level. In terms of financial aid, Thailand was quite generous, offering a total of \$29.7 million. Apart from this, the more economically developed states — Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore — contributed larger sums to defense costs. Nevertheless, even the less developed states helped to the best of their capacity. The personal contribution should also be highlighted: Myanmar willingly allowed medical rescue teams from the Philippines, Laos, Singapore (psychological assistance), Thailand, and Vietnam to enter the country. Here, too, Thailand contributed to the humanitarian operations to an extraordinary extent, as it sent two teams and took care of the reception and further coordination of foreign aid at the airport.

5 Discussion: Disaster Diplomacy Analysis

Regarding Cyclone Nargis, it may first appear that the emphasis was on regional and international cooperation. Although Myanmar has completely refrained from global assistance, ASEAN's diplomatic moves have greatly

promoted cooperation (Kapucu, 2011: p. 20). After the accession of Myanmar, ASEAN tried to integrate the relatively underdeveloped country to become an active member of the association. However, the ongoing domestic political problems and the 2007 riots divided the member states regarding Myanmar. Therefore, the tropical disaster reached Southeast Asian states in a rather cool diplomatic environment.

Regarding the property of nonlinearity, the role of the Secretary-General at the time, Surin Pitsuwan, must be emphasized. He was the first to initiate the joint ASEAN cooperation, referring to the AADMER framework, which was not yet in force at the time, so one person's decision directly launched the regional cooperation. During the follow-up of the event, his role was widely discussed as Pitsuwan — quite exceeding his authority — regularly imposed his will on the alliance (even in 2012, at the end of his reign, he was already quite unpopular among the member states, as he “still behaved as if he were the foreign minister”; Loy, 2012). Although Bangkok was already a regional flight hub with sufficient airport capacity, through Pitsuwan's closer ties with the Thai government, Bangkok could act as a staging post for relief to Myanmar.

This way, he heavily influenced the relief process, making his motherland one of the centers of dealing with Cyclone Nargis. His ulterior motive was presumably (Marchi, 2014; McCarthy, 2020) the integration of Myanmar as well as the conscious utilization of the circumstances of the disaster in diplomacy. By all means, the initial cold environment truly began to ease following Pitsuwan's decision and logistical support of Thailand. Thus, the degree of nonlinearity was significant.

The level of diversity can hardly be interpreted regarding the storm of 2008, as only Myanmar was affected by the disaster among the ASEAN member states. Therefore, the different attitudes and reactions to be examined can be observed only regarding donor activities. All member states offered different levels of assistance to Myanmar's government in line with their capacities. The offering of more developed economies — for example, Singapore or Indonesia — was significant, while the developing economies — for example, Cambodia — contributed more modestly, mainly in financial terms. However, the countries did not differ in that they all participated in the cooperation without exception, so the level of diversity was limited.

The third property, flow, was not observed before the strike but became significant immediately after. There was no visible flow of information in the prevention phase; the disaster was only predicted by external agencies — the Indian Meteorological Department and the Hawaiian-based Joint Typhoon Prediction Center. After the hit, Myanmar shut itself off from the international environment, so neither information-sharing nor the flow of aid could

be experienced. On the other hand, after Myanmar agreed to cooperate with Southeast Asian countries on May 8, the flow started gradually both in terms of people and aid. Thus, the property of flow was realized to a limited extent.

Aggregation played an extremely significant role in dealing with Cyclone Nargis. Although the regional disaster management framework has not yet entered into force, ASEAN has implemented its provisions. The Southeast Asian organization created a regional platform for cooperation and coordinated international aid — considering the interests and intentions of Myanmar. Thus, although the member states had no legal obligation, they defined and complied with the framework of cooperation.

The presence of the first mechanism, tagging, can be said to be limited to varying degrees. On the one hand, ASEAN coordinated international aid with a Bangkok center and forwarded it to Myanmar, so Thailand was considered the nexus for participants in disaster diplomacy. Nevertheless, since Myanmar has withheld foreign non-Southeast Asian personnel assistance, there has been little tagging at the actual damage sites. Only the ASEAN, TCG, and PONJA teams were allowed to enter the state territory. Thus, the mechanism is, on the one hand, high due to Thailand's role, but on the other hand, extremely restrained due to Myanmar's isolation.

The mechanism of the internal model is significant: the ASEAN member states acted in unison to protect against the cyclone. After the Secretary General's call at the time, Southeast Asia became the center of dealing with Cyclone Nargis, so the individual countries — albeit to varying degrees — participated jointly in averting the disaster and eliminating the damage.

As a final mechanism, building blocks also significantly determined tropical storm forecasting, prevention, and liquidation of the caused damage. Such building blocks are the Indian Meteorological Department and the Joint Typhoon Prediction Center in Hawaii. Furthermore, the international conferences organized by ASEAN, the ERAT team completing its first deployment, the TCG, and the PONJA program also played a role in connecting actors in the recovery phase. Therefore, the building blocks playing an important role in disaster diplomacy can be said to be significant.

Table 2 presents the variables of disaster diplomacy activity observed during Cyclone Nargis. It can be seen clearly that two properties and two mechanisms were significantly present in preventing the disaster, and the other variables were observed to a limited extent.

Prior to 2008, no significant disaster cooperation could be observed in the region except for the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Additionally, the lack of legal and institutional framework greatly determined the disaster diplomacy processes. Cyclone Nargis in 2008 showcased a rare proactivity

TABLE 2 Disaster diplomacy variables of cyclone Nargis 2008

Property/mechanism	Level	Manifestation
Nonlinearity	Significant	The initiative of the ASEAN Secretary-General, who was of Thai nationality, greatly determined the regional cooperation
Diversity	Limited	Member states have all made offers, albeit to varying degrees
Flow	Limited	First a significant shortage, then a gradual flow of information, people, and aid
Aggregation	Significant	Validation of AADMER and a common platform
Tagging	Limited	Indonesia and the UN as partners
Internal model	Significant	United action of the member states
Building blocks	Significant	Conferences, ERAT, TCG, PONJA

in the region. Thus, the catastrophic event and its management were highly decisive in the dynamics of the region. It broke the established cold diplomatic atmosphere and played an essential role in the integration of Myanmar. Moreover, it was the first event where international disaster management took on a distinctly regional character: Naypyidaw was more readily open to ASEAN than the entire international community. Additionally, the member states applied particular regional diplomatic tools: negotiations, conferences, and reports within the event's follow-up. This attitude supported the previously determined diplomatic principles, i.e., peaceful conflict management and confidence-building. Therefore, the expressed disaster diplomacy wholly fits into the regional method of diplomacy.

6 Conclusion

Cyclone Nargis was one of the worst natural disasters in Southeast Asia's modern history. In Myanmar alone, it killed 140 000 people and caused \$4 billion USD (in 2008) in economic damage, affecting 2.4 million people. Myanmar, struggling with internal political disturbances, was at a diplomatic low point at the time of the natural disaster, which also divided the ASEAN states to a

great extent. In this challenging situation, Myanmar's decisions following the disaster were first characterized by complete isolation from the international community, which further deepened the confusion surrounding the disaster. The key figure in the disaster diplomacy efforts was the Secretary-General at the time, Surin Pitsuwan, who initiated the unified, regional action and, being the former Thai Foreign Minister, made Thailand the coordination center for international aid. In the days following the strike, international cooperation began as a slow process, and the cooperation was implemented exclusively in accordance with the principles of the ASEAN and Naypyidaw's preferences. Although the partnership thus focused exclusively on the restoration phase, it can with certainty be said to be successful in the sense of disaster diplomacy.

The norm of "unity in diversity" regularly appears in Southeast Asia's political and security communication (Elumbre, 2019). This idea can also be seen in actions in the regional disaster risk management structure and legislative environment: the ASEAN disaster management strategy was even named "One ASEAN, One Response" (AHA Centre, 2018). Overall, in the case of Cyclone Nargis, the member states and Surin Pitsuwan sought to create unity, even if this endeavor significantly reduced the effectiveness of the emergency actions. The negotiations gradually pushed forward the divided ASEAN regarding Myanmar, and the idea of "unity in diversity" could be realized in accordance with the interests of the affected country.

The theoretical framework of disaster diplomacy (Kelman, 2012) points out that over the long-term non-disaster factors have a more significant impact on diplomacy than disaster-related activities. Despite its significance and executed destruction, reference to the storm rarely appears in ASEAN documents: neither blueprints (ASEAN, 2015, 2016a,b) nor other strategies mention the disaster. Only the AADMER program (ASEAN, 2020) and the disaster prevention strategy (AHA Centre, 2018) highlight the event, although only to support regional vulnerability and not to verify the successes of the cooperation. To this degree, it can be stated that the event monitoring was not realized. Furthermore, the regional narrative does not consider its real significance. This tendency supports the disaster diplomacy principle as Cyclone Nargis has little impact on the diplomatic processes of today's Southeast Asia.

Besides its significance, the successful example of Cyclone Nargis has not been duplicated since 2008. Even greater disaster events — such as Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 — remained local emergencies with broader assistance from the international community. ASEAN diplomacy was reviewed and developed in the 2010s, yet the most discussed topics did not include disaster cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état cooled regional diplomacy, and presently, the confidence-building offered by the

member states does not seem intense. The association might find its own regional answer — as was done during the 2008 cyclone — emphasizing conflict management and confidence-building for regional stability and peace as a common goal. Hopefully, the lessons learned during and after Cyclone Nargis could support this process.

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