

# 6. Security cooperation to deliver maritime-based humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and resilience and search and rescue

Miranda Booth and Genevieve Quirk

- Both humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and search and rescue (SAR) involve operations with extensive access to areas of military interest. In the crowded geostrategic oceanscape of the Pacific, HADR, in particular, is increasingly seen as an opportunity for strategic advantage.
- Security cooperation aligned with an international rules-based order adheres to international disaster response laws and guidelines for civil-military interactions in HADR and SAR.
- For HADR, the primary principle is that the affected community and government lead disaster relief efforts. Accordingly, the Pacific seeks regional coordination through its own mechanisms within the Blue Pacific regional security architecture. The Pacific also reframes HADR to include a resilience-based approach, which must guide maritime security partners' engagement with the region.
- Regional initiatives for SAR are vital to support Pacific Island countries' capacities to meet their obligations and respond to SAR needs in a challenging oceanscape.

As the geostrategic space becomes increasingly crowded, HADR and SAR is a more significant currency for assisting

and acquiring visibility and priority as a Pacific partner. HADR, in particular, is fast becoming a tool of statecraft as crises and competition for influence escalate in the Pacific.<sup>172</sup> The past decade has witnessed an increase in the frequency and intensity of climate change-related disasters such as tropical cyclones, and forecasts are far more catastrophic.<sup>173</sup> This paper focuses on *who* and *how* and *if* international partners meet the Pacific priorities for HADR and SAR.

The United Nations (UN) **Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs** (OCHA) has established an Office of the Pacific which coordinates humanitarian action for fourteen Pacific Island countries in partnership with international actors.<sup>174</sup> International actors are, however, under international disaster response law only deployed with the consent of the affected government and in principle, when the affected government has formally requested external assistance.<sup>175</sup> The guidelines on the use of foreign military assets in disaster response operations also specify that foreign military assets should be utilised only if comparable civilian assistance is unavailable.<sup>176</sup> This foreign military assistance must be strictly time-bound, specific in its geographic scope, and include a clear exit strategy.<sup>177</sup> International relief efforts

are further underpinned by the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality.<sup>178</sup>

Although the engagement of foreign military assets is a 'last resort' option



under international disaster response law, they are among the first capabilities offered by assisting states in the Pacific. The magnitude of climate-related disasters mean that large-scale events may overwhelm national and international civilian capacity more frequently, and that foreign militaries will continue to provide unique and vital capabilities to meet humanitarian gaps.<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, whilst all international disaster relief efforts including HADR are guided by humanitarian principles, the military is not a humanitarian actor. HADR conducted by foreign military forces may contain an element of coercion;<sup>180</sup> and can advance hard and soft power interests of assisting governments, including by signalling readiness and capability; enhancing military interoperability across allies and partners; exercising a regional presence; building trust; and fostering a positive public image and standing with the affected communities.<sup>181</sup>

HADR is a key dimension of international partnerships including the **Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue** (QUAD),<sup>182</sup> the **FRANZ (France, Australia, New Zealand) Arrangement**,<sup>183</sup> **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (Pacific-Quad),<sup>184</sup> and the **Partners in the Blue Pacific**.<sup>185</sup> Military

partners cooperate through joint exercises to promote preparedness and inter-operability for HADR. The 2023 Southern Cross HADR exercise, for example, involved 19 states, 10 surface vessels, 15 aircraft, and 3000 people.<sup>186</sup> The 2023 **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting** (SPDDM) members approved the development of a **HADR Interoperability Guide**, an instructive document to facilitate planning of future exercise and operations.<sup>187</sup> During HADR operations, disaster diplomacy between assisting and affected governments can form the basis of productive networks of assistance in support of the affected government.

Civil-military interactions in HADR have demonstrated substantial success and have built upon regional lessons-learned in disaster relief. Cyclone Winston (2016) was the most intense cyclone in the Southern Hemisphere, and Cyclone Pam (2015), the most destructive. Both operations involved a significant international civil-military component in support of the affected governments, and HADR evaluation reports emphasised robust operations under national disaster management offices.<sup>188</sup> Cooperative initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the **Pacific**

**Humanitarian Pathway** established by Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers, are equally demonstrative of the success of Pacific-led coordination structures.<sup>189</sup> However, the geostrategic oceanscape is also changing, with disasters now a growing site for geostrategic competition.<sup>190</sup> The 2022 Tongan volcanic eruption response is illustrative. The Australian Defence Force established an **International Coordination Cell** with Tonga, Fiji, Japan, France, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States (US).<sup>191</sup> China delivered assistance without directly coordinating with other partners;<sup>192</sup> and demonstrated the range of its military capabilities with the rapid use of People's Liberation Army vessels and planes.<sup>193</sup> The Tongan disaster engaged a diverse array of regional and external powers, whose efforts were not always coordinated, yet all sought credit for their contribution. Analysts from the European Union (EU), for example, piqued in their observation that 'Canberra and Wellington were initially given full credit, without France or the EU gaining a mention'.<sup>194</sup> Alongside these cooperative and competitive dynamics, are ongoing questions related to the quality of humanitarian assistance partners provide;<sup>195</sup> the absorptive capacity of affected governments; and the effectiveness of coordination between partners and affected countries remain.<sup>196</sup>

There is significant interest in a regional coordination centre for HADR within the regional security architecture. One evident route is through the established Office of the Pacific under the UN OCHA, which has links to the UN's Civil-Military Coordination Section and the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. In 2023, SPDMM members also supported Australia's proposal for a **Pacific Response Group**, which has been likened to a Pacific battalion of SPDMM members, and would include HADR in its scope of operations.<sup>197</sup> China has also proposed a centre for disaster management and risk reduction outside the regional security architecture.<sup>198</sup> While many models for a regional HADR coordination centre are possible, the Pacific is determined under the 2018 **Boe Declaration on Regional Security** to strengthen the existing regional security architecture.<sup>199</sup> The Pacific is commencing a Pacific-led approach to HADR through the new **Pacific**



### Islands Forum Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction Ministers Meeting.<sup>200A</sup>

Pacific-led coordination centre is crucial to facilitate oversight of international HADR actors to ensure their conduct in Pacific Island countries is aligned with Pacific priorities and preferences; and is responsive to the needs and absorptive capacity of affected governments.

It is also critical that Pacific priorities for resilience-based and non-militarised HADR options form central pillars in this coordination centre.<sup>201</sup> At the grassroots level in Pacific Island countries there is resistance to the use of foreign military assets in HADR operations.<sup>202</sup> Extensive non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, and Church-based organisations together ‘firmly oppose the militarization of our islands and oceans’ and spoke out with one voice for the cancellation of the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) warfare exercises which does also include HADR practices.<sup>203</sup> Leveraging alternatives to foreign military assets is possible, because HADR operations are in principle civilian in character, with foreign military assets in principle only used to address critical gaps between humanitarian needs and available civilian capacities. NGOs are significant players in HADR operations and those with vessels can offer key resources in support of maritime-based disaster relief efforts.<sup>204</sup> NGOs are also non-state actors who respect the principle of neutrality and build credibility during disaster relief interventions by upholding the requirement for impartiality.<sup>205</sup> Another alternative is a Pacific-owned vessel; the Pacific Community (SPC) is currently seeking funding toward a **Pacific Fisheries Science Vessel** to enable regional scientific capacity.<sup>206</sup> Regional HADR partners with genuine interest in Pacific agency and resilience could contribute to a Pacific-owned vessel with the unique attributes suitable for HADR operations.

The Pacific is consistent, clear, and direct in their classification of climate change as the single greatest security threat to their region. From the Pacific’s perspective, the threat of climate change demands mitigation and resilience. The Pacific recognises the interdependence between climate change responses and disaster risk reduction, reorienting intra-regional cooperation under

the integrated 2016 **Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific**.<sup>207</sup>

In linking climate resilience to disaster management, the Pacific has reframed the conditions through which HADR is practised with the Pacific-led Pacific Resilience Facility.<sup>208</sup> In 2024, the Pacific leaders endorsed the Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction Ministers Meeting’s work to ‘coordinate regional efforts to effectively address disaster risks, manage humanitarian action and response.’<sup>209</sup>

Since the 2016 **Pohnpei Statement: Strengthening Pacific Resilience to Climate Change and Disaster Risk** the Pacific has called on international partners for nationally-led disaster responses and support for a resilience based approach.<sup>210</sup> In response to this and other calls, HADR partners to Pacific Island countries require a complementary climate strategy to address their collective role in contributing to climate change-related hydrometeorological disasters.<sup>211</sup> Such a strategy must avoid placing the Pacific on an accelerated trajectory for marine natural hazards, thereby preventing low-lying islands from becoming new sites for HADR operations. One challenge to realising such an approach is that players that regard the Pacific as a geostrategic theatre have the resources to compete, design their own resilience outside the regional architecture, and employ parallel strategies in *defence* and *development* to realise their primary defence agenda whilst only partially satisfying Pacific demands. Arguably, however, if partners show up for the accolades of cooperative relief, without contributing to resilience, they have missed the boat.

SAR is regulated under the 1982 **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea** which obligates states to provide search and rescue services and requires flag states to render assistance at sea.<sup>212</sup>

The 1974 **International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea and 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue**, both operating under the **International Maritime Organisation** (IMO), have recently incorporated amendments on human rights and maritime crime.<sup>213</sup> In the Pacific region, the SPC coordinates the regional arrangements to meet the requirements set forth by these IMO instruments on SAR.<sup>214</sup> Nonetheless, meeting SAR duties in the vast oceanscape of the

Pacific is often beyond the capabilities of Pacific Island countries. Hence, Pacific Island countries and partners cooperate to provide SAR through the 2014 **Maritime Search and Rescue Technical Arrangement for Cooperation Among Pacific Island Countries and Territories that Support International Life Saving in the Pacific Ocean**.<sup>215</sup> The SAR region of responsibility of New Zealand is 40 million km<sup>2</sup>; Australia’s covers nearly 53 million km<sup>2</sup>; Fiji 6 million km<sup>2</sup>; France has duties for SAR in the New Caledonian zone of 2.4 million km<sup>2</sup>, and French Polynesian zone of 12.5 million km<sup>2</sup>; and the US duties for SAR extend in the north of the Blue Pacific to 36.7 million km<sup>2</sup>. All contribute robust and extensive coverage across the across the vast and challenging expanse Pacific. As Pacific Island countries have significant SAR regions, efforts are also undertaken through the **Pacific SAR Steering Committee**, which seeks to build capacity to addressing the unique maritime SAR challenges faced by small island developing states, including the vast geographic space with varied weather patterns and dispersed island groups, and different resource capacities for SAR, thereby enhancing regional safety.<sup>216</sup>

The current issue of HADR and SAR is the matter of access to strategically important Pacific security assets. The *who* and *how* of HADR and SAR is regulated by international disaster response law and guidelines and other multilateral arrangements; the needs, priorities and preferences of affected governments; and the capacities and interests of assisting governments. International partners have successfully met Pacific priorities for HADR and SAR through a combination of cooperative preparedness and response initiatives. However, diverging security priorities, attempts at geostrategic game playing for credit, and ongoing questions related to mechanisms for effective assistance have the potential to undermine the credibility of partners and the quality of partnerships in HADR. For SAR, continued cooperation is vital to ensure ongoing capacity across the vast Blue Pacific.