

## **The Tsunami Core Group: A Step toward a Transformed Diplomacy in Asia and Beyond**

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As I hung up the phone on 6 January 2005 with the other original members of the Tsunami Core Group – Koji Tsuruoka, the Deputy Director General of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doug Chester, the Deputy Secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Shyam Saran, the Indian Foreign Secretary – we had reason to believe that we had made a contribution to the global response to the tragedy brought on by the tsunami of 26 December 2004.

During our nine days and nights of almost 24/7 effort, the amount of aid reaching the tsunami victims had radically increased thanks to the remarkable official and private response to the disaster. The challenge was especially daunting given the size and scope of the tragedy and of the initial deployment made to meet it. The United States, Japan, India and Australia together contributed more than 40,000 troops and humanitarian responders, in addition to dozens of helicopters, cargo ships, and transport planes. These forces deployed with extraordinary speed and skill. The United Nations had begun to take responsibility for this global effort, and the world's leaders were about to gather in Jakarta on January 6 to pledge even more assistance to the victims and to support the United Nations' lead role in tsunami relief and, increasingly, the challenge of reconstruction.

As we finished our calls, we had, perhaps, one other reason to be optimistic: we had experimented with a new style of diplomatic coordination and action. The Tsunami Core Group was an organization that never met in one of diplomacy's storied cities, never issued a communiqué, never created a secretariat, and took as one of its successes its own demise. The Core Group was an example of a new style of diplomacy, and there are perhaps lessons to be learned from the experience.

The 21st century diplomat must participate in winning the global war on terrorism, which requires action and puts a premium on creating new friends and allies and fostering new coalitions. The contemporary American, Australian, Japanese or Indian diplomat must also deal with the benefits and consequences of globalization; a world in which decision cycles are much more rapid; where NGOs play a major role in making and executing policy (as they did during the response to the tsunami); where the internet and 24-

hour news channels, including Asia's popular Star media network, put a premium on response and commitment to reporting the truth. The need to respond to humanitarian crises, fight HIV/AIDS, defeat organized crime, battle corruption and narco-terrorism are all jobs for today's diplomatic professionals; tasks welcomed by those with vision, but demanding new ways of thinking and working. The Core Group was just such a phenomenon: this was an ad hoc coalition that ignored traditional groupings. We pulled these specific countries together simply because they were the ones with the resources and the desire to act effectively and quickly.

Over the past few years, international and regional organizations have begun to evolve to meet these new threats. An enlarged NATO has been transformed since 1999 to focus on terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and the threat to peace and security that comes from internal conflict in places like Afghanistan and Iraq – locales far beyond Europe. The Organization of American States, meeting in Mexico City in October 2003, adopted a new Charter of Hemispheric Security. In Asia too, APEC has confronted emerging threats by establishing the Counter Terrorism Task Force to coordinate the implementation of its 2002 Statement on Fighting Terrorism and Promoting Growth. In Africa, the focus on conflict prevention and resolution, combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic and promoting democracy has required new thinking and new resources, most recently from the G-8. And the UN General Assembly will begin to debate this month the UN Secretary General's proposals for change. It is past time to adopt much needed reform in that vital international body, which must be effective in order to confront future challenges.

There was one other important factor that allowed the Tsunami Core Group to experiment with transformed diplomacy: the commitment of Australia, India, Japan and the United States to spend serious money to deploy capable and sustainable forces to deal with crises. More than 4,000 Indian troops were among the first to arrive in Sri Lanka and those parts of India that had been hit. Over the next few weeks, the United States supplied 12,600 Defense Department personnel, 21 ships (including the 1,000 bed Mercy hospital ship), 14 cargo planes, and more than 90 helicopters to the relief effort. Australia and Japan also made generous contributions by deploying more than 1,000 personnel and huge amounts of funding and materiel to the affected region.

As we fashioned the response to the tsunami, the lines of transformation converged. A challenge to the security of citizens of many nations was met by modern military forces, a new kind of diplomacy and astonishing public and NGO outreach. This was not the first time some of our countries had tested transitional diplomacy. Countries in the Asia-Pacific region and the United States have worked together over the past few years to turn theory into practical policies. For example, on 12 July 2005, the United States and

Singapore signed a Strategic Framework Agreement which Singapore Defense Minister Teo called a model of 'activity-based diplomacy'. The Proliferation Security Initiative – a partnership of countries, including Singapore, Australia, Japan, and the US, using their own laws and resources, is determined to stop shipments of WMD, delivery systems, and related materials at sea, in the air, or on land. Likewise, the Container Security Initiative seeks to safeguard ports in participating countries, which currently include China, Thailand, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

How did the Core Group organize its work? We came together at the request of our leaders (and after a round of consultation initiated by then-Secretary of State Powell) around four principles:

First, purpose: supply the victims with as much aid as necessary as quickly as possible.

Second, communicate: The Core Group cycle included a daily telephone conference call, which I chaired each evening at 22:00 Washington time; a series of e-mail exchanges during the 24 hours between Core Group conference calls; and the use, especially with the United Nations, of video teleconferencing, to include, at one crucial session, Secretary Powell and his tsunami response team in a video teleconference with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and his senior leadership.

Third, brevity: The daily Core Group conference calls had a mutually agreed time limit; none lasted more than 40 minutes. We also never had more than three agenda questions for the calls: One, are any of our efforts duplicative? Two, are there any gaps that need to be filled by any of the military or civilian assets of the nations represented on the call? After the first call, we added Jan Egelund, UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, and proceeded with agenda item three: Are we doing all we can to support the United Nations in its effort? (We also added, at their request, a representative of the Dutch EU Presidency and of Canada.)

Fourth, from the very beginning, the Core Group had as one of its primary objectives putting itself out of business, which it did in Jakarta.

In broader terms, the search for a new kind of diplomacy – a diplomacy that is active and not passive, that directly responds to the new challenges our nations face – has been a subject of professional and public interest since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In her first town meeting with State Department employees on 2 February 2005, Secretary Rice said: 'Transformational diplomacy means taking on new tasks, breaking old habits, working with people who are trying to transform themselves, being partners with those around the world who share our values and want to improve their lives'.

Advocating a new style of diplomacy is not to criticize our previous efforts or our predecessors. Rather, it is about recognizing that if we are to meet the needs of our publics, who are rightly ever more involved in the formation and often the execution of foreign policy, we need new ways of thinking and organization.

As I look back on those days following the tsunami, I think it is fair to say we met the tasks set for us by our leaders and those we set for ourselves. Is the Tsunami Core Group a model for a new style of diplomacy? It is probably too soon to tell, but I am convinced that the contribution the Core Group members made was not just part of an effective response to a humanitarian disaster but also a further experiment in a new way of making diplomacy work in the 21st century.

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