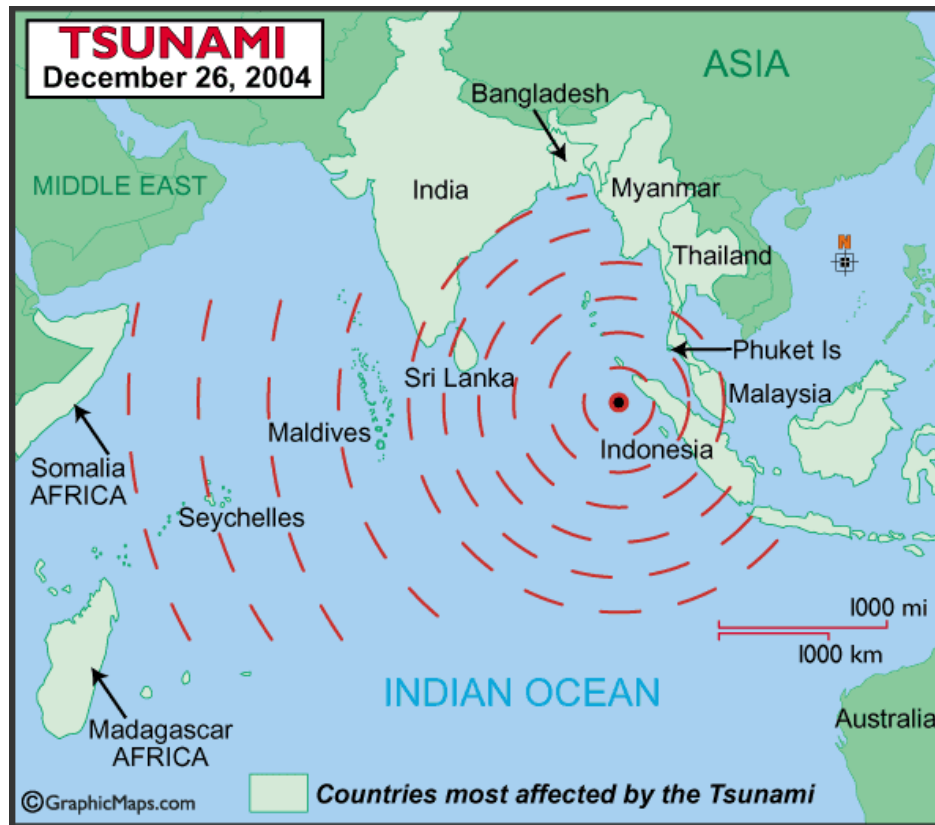


# Post-Tsunami International Relations: A Sea Change?



Source: <http://worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/tsunami.htm>

Around the world, people tell mythical stories of a flood, a calamitous surge in water levels, which marks both an end and a beginning.

On the morning of December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004, an undersea earthquake in the Indian Ocean set off a tsunami that hit the shores of Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and southern coast, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and parts of the Eastern African coastline. Six months on, there is no final death toll, but the numbers could top 250,000. This does not count the injured, the displaced and the missing. In all, one giant sea-surge altered millions of lives forever. Did the tsunami alter international relations as well?

This briefing will argue that the tsunami constitutes a historic moment as important as the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11.

## Listing the Portents

If one simply considers the number of people the disaster affected, both the estimated numbers of the dead, wounded, missing and displaced, as well as the larger populations of the states whose coastal areas were hit and who will bear the economic and ecological consequences, one does not have to belabor the argument that the history of human interactions must surely bear the impress of this event. Other developments followed that underscore the view of the tsunami as a pivotal event.

Promising help within hours of the disaster, India sent relief assistance to Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia. This included medical teams and supplies, water, a water purification plant and emergency rations. India also underscored its position as an aid donor by refusing the assistance of other states, suggesting it be sent where it was needed more. India's quick response as a donor—which may also be read as its quick assertion of its pre-eminence in this area—led to its inclusion in a consultative group on coordinating relief efforts with the US, Australia and Japan.

But generosity in the face of disaster was not the monopoly of a few states or individuals. Unprecedented giving made non-governmental organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières announce that they had enough resources to deal with this crisis—a move that was controversial in relief circles. The question has in fact been raised: why are these deaths, this destruction in any way seen as more tragic and deserving of help than those due to AIDS or war or just poverty?

As coordination of relief efforts was ceded to the United Nations and its agencies, a third important if subtle change followed. The UN, which appeared ineffective in earlier crises, came into its own with its specialized agencies drawing on years of field experience.

Like the UN, the nation-state has also been dismissed as diminishing in importance. The tsunami both reinforced and countered this view. That the tidal wave could sweep across the carefully calibrated maritime boundaries of states underscored the need to see us as belonging to interdependent, ecologically connected communities. The importance of planning together, as well as the importance of participating in multilateral programs to share technology and communicate information became apparent as stories began to circulate of how some agencies outside the region could have predicted the tsunami but had no means of communicating this information.

On the other hand, it was clear that the most well meaning civil society organizations could not completely replace the state as the primary relief agent. A distinguishing feature of the relief efforts in Tamil Nadu, India has been the effective leadership of the state administration.

In fact, the experience of Sri Lanka and Maldives substantiates this. When the tsunami happened, Sri Lankan efforts to resolve the ethnic conflict were in disarray. The need to focus first on relief and rescue operations reinforced the ceasefire temporarily, and under pressure from tsunami aid donors, the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have just signed an agreement to formalize their sharing of reconstruction assistance.

Similarly, 2004 was a year of pro-democracy dissent in the Maldives and the Maldivian presidency was under great strain. The weeks after the tsunami shifted the focus to rescue and relief operations and to assessments of what needed to be done. In the elections held a month later, a few rebel candidates were returned to the Maldivian Majlis (Parliament). In the months that have followed, internal and external pressure has resulted in the introduction of political reforms that implemented, could be significant.

The tsunami disaster has also thus been an opportunity to put down for a short while the battles people have been fighting and to start afresh. In affected areas, the devastation is near total so that communities are beginning with a clean slate. As relief efforts metamorphose into development, this is a chance for those who never received the benefits of development in the first place to do so. The accent in many of the assessments and six-month reviews is on such a change—to include the hitherto excluded. This includes the decentralization—and democratization—of relief and development efforts.

## Reading the Portents

These striking developments, which were overshadowed by the enormity of the disaster and the magnitude of the reconstruction challenge, open the possibility of six ways in which international relations will be altered.

### 1. Revaluation of sovereignty in the system of states

As waters washed over maritime frontiers and debris continues to wash up across the breadth of the Indian Ocean, the obsolescence of territorially delimited decision-making and decision-making with ecological blinkers was established. Even more decisively than the information revolution and globalization, the tsunami is forcing us to think of what it means to be an independent, self-governing political community.

We can each have our space, but can we make choices that will have consequences for others? Whether it is upstream pollution or global warming, someone else pays for our choices. We can choose to cooperate or not, but who pays for our decisions? In this instance, choosing not to share technology and not to be part of certain regimes meant not knowing a tsunami was on its way. Sovereign choices of that sort may be legal and impressive, but they are no longer a choice. Further, can states claim sovereignty when they need so much help to recover from disasters like this one?

A few years ago, the scholarly community celebrated the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Westphalia that spelt out sovereignty and statehood for contemporary Europeans, creating the model we all adhere to now. It is now time for a serious revaluation of sovereignty for our times.

### 2. The emergence of new actors and coalitions

While India has repeatedly asserted its regional interests, this crisis, following its recent economic successes, has succeeded in winning some international recognition of its interest in regional affairs and ability to intervene in them. This buttresses India's quest for a UN Security Council seat, as do its efforts to make peace with its neighbours. However, the same neighbours have always viewed India's regional pre-eminence—hegemony, in their view—with suspicion and ambivalence.

The emergence of India, Australia and Japan as states with a natural interest in Indian Ocean affairs has important implications beyond their new importance. But who was left out is as important as who was included. China, for one, was not part of the post-tsunami international coordination group; nor was Russia. Both states have historic connections to the Indian Ocean. The emergence of new actors is always accompanied by a restructuring of coalitions and alliances.

### 3. New signposts, new schisms

It is not merely the emergence of new actors, but also of new signposts, that creates new interests and relationships in international relations. 9/11 is a case in point. Shocked by the panache with which the attacks had been planned and executed, the world stood in solidarity with the US—until the US' response took the form of raids on Afghanistan. The run-up to the Iraq campaign completed the erosion of that support, even within the US.

The tsunami too has its schism-making potential and this is likely to happen around two issues, which are already being voiced. First, as state and multilateral donors start to tie their assistance to political conditions—the EU and Commonwealth telling the Maldives to liberalize and donors to Sri Lanka insisting on a Joint Mechanism, for instance—people in these societies will become resentful. Where such conditions seek to put a band-aid on one fissure, others will develop. Down the line, recipient states will also echo this resentment, much as earlier generations of aid-recipients resented Cold War and structural adjustment preconditions to giving.

Second, the unprecedented generosity of ordinary people around the world and the renewed talk of providing debt relief or write-offs to states affected by the tsunami, quite legitimately raise the question: why is this worse than all the other kinds of death and devastation around the world? An unanswerable question, this is likely to divide those countries that were affected by the tsunami and those unaffected but reeling from other catastrophes. Incidentally, there was some of

this reaction to 9/11 too. People living in other places who experience conflict and terrorist violence everyday were asking: why is this worse?

#### 4. The re-emergence of the United Nations

What the tsunami has shown is that the United Nations does matter. It is in a unique position to coordinate activities that span many states. Its specialized agencies have the experience, infrastructure and personnel to reach disaster areas very quickly. A history of field involvement is accentuated by the emphasis in the last decade or so on systematic institutional learning. The United Nations is an invaluable resource for new entrants who may bring money, human resources and good intentions but no local knowledge.

This is particularly important to consider in a season of UN reforms. Responses to the idea of UN reforms fall in three categories. First, there are those who would like to reform the UN in such a way that they now benefit from its power structures. The aspirants to Security Council permanent membership fall in this group. Second, there are those who would like to alter those power structures fundamentally—and chances are, they will not succeed. Finally, there are those who hold a dim view of the organization and consider it redundant. The perspective of tsunami victims around Asia suggests that the last would be tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

#### 5. Remembering the potential of the state

Tsunami relief efforts have shown that the nation-state and national governments have an important part to play in the survival of the community, beyond military protection. The failure or inability of states to be part of disaster warning arrangements brought devastation, and the failure or inability of states to undertake reconstruction will do the same. Notwithstanding the multi-pronged assault in recent decades on the idea of the state, its potential is undiminished.

However, this potential is mediated by two factors: the nature of the state and its efficacy.

India's reconstruction efforts are hardly flawless, but they are still outstanding in this context. This has less to do with its political, military or financial resources than with the quality of its administrative structures (even though those are in decline). A strong district level administration, able to reach out to villages and accountable to the public for its actions, has made a great deal of difference, even to the efforts of non-governmental organizations. By contrast, where such a structure does not exist or has been destroyed in the course of conflict, this was not possible.

#### 6. Disasters as opportunities

Starting from scratch, post-tsunami reconstruction involves building houses and boats, schools and hospitals. As the bereaved grieve and the displaced return, it is also an opportunity to rebuild relationships. Most significant from our point of view, disasters are opportunities to rewrite the rules of engagement in a society.

The hesitant overtures towards democracy in the Maldives are one illustration, even if it remains to be seen whether these will remain on paper or take effect. In Sri Lanka, the determination of the President to use the opening afforded by the post-tsunami reconstruction process to engage with the LTTE is another example. Several important questions may remain: the question of their claim to represent Tamils, the question of the President having enough support, the probability that this move will backfire. The fact nevertheless remains that this may have taken much longer to happen without the tsunami.

Similarly, in India, criticism that relief and reconstruction are perpetuating the bias against the Dalits is something that policy analysts and practitioners should contend with. The tsunami presents Indian society with an opportunity to rethink development in both sustainable and equitable ways.

Why is this important for international relations? Because notwithstanding neo-realist wisdom, what happens inside the black box is important for what happens outside. Peaceful, equitable, democratic societies are less likely to generate huge refugee flows. They are more likely to be economically self-sustaining and able to participate in the global economy. Cumulatively, they also alter regional and global power equations. Better human security is better global security.