

# **US Disaster Response Aid in US Southern Command Region: An Effective Tool for Maintaining Primacy in a Disaster-Prone Strategic Arena with China?**

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## **Introduction**

The portfolio of the United States (US) Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) encompasses Latin America and the Caribbean, a region of 33 independent countries diverse in languages, ethnic groups, geography, and political systems. There is a common factor, however, that impacts many of the states in this region - the risk of natural disasters. The USSOUTHCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR) is the second most disaster prone region in the world, with climate change further increasing its vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> Natural disasters, including floods, storms, droughts, fires, epidemics, pandemics, earthquakes, volcanic ash, among others, have occurred 1,566 times in the region since 2000, causing immeasurable damage and frequently accompanied by humanitarian emergencies and loss of life.<sup>2</sup> The countries in this region often rely on international aid in the form of medical supplies, food, water, clothing, and other supplies when their domestic resources are overwhelmed. Disaster response aid is, therefore, a poignant tool for foreign relations while also bolstering regional response efforts.

The US has been the most involved partner in disaster response aid with their southern neighbors for over 200 years, but how effective has this been in sustaining strong relations in the region? Moreover, is the increasing global influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) challenging the US as the preeminent international influence in the region? This article analyzes how the US can use disaster response aid as a tool to maintain influential primacy over China in the USSOUTHCOM AOR and discusses necessary background information on this topic. This article presents an analysis of raw data, and its relevance to the overall China-US Great Power Competition (GPC) in USSOUTHCOM. Lastly, this article offers policy recommendations to improve effective use of disaster response aid in USSOUTHCOM to maximize its impact as a diplomatic tool and improve US favorability in the region. The US can then leverage this strength to sustain its

position of influence with its southern neighbors as China makes headway in challenging US in this and other areas of foreign relations. For the US to maintain its position as the primary great power in the USSOUTHCOM AOR and protect its national interests in the Western Hemisphere, this article recommends that the US continually resources and improves its disaster response aid. This can be done through increased funding and greater flexibility in spending, diplomatic reciprocity in accepting aid, and increased bilateral and multilateral training exercises. With these three adjustments, as well as continued spending in disaster prevention and climate resilience in the region, along with humanitarian cooperation with China when appropriate, the US will maximize disaster response aid as a diplomatic tool, minimize suffering, and maintain a competitive advantage over China.

### **Background: Strategic Importance of USSOUTHCOM**

In addition to cultural and historical links binding the US to USSOUTHCOM countries, economic ties and geographically shared land and maritime borders make USSOUTHCOM uniquely significant to US national security. Instability within USSOUTHCOM countries is likely to impact the US through secondary effects such as migration waves, increased international organized crime, and negative environmental repercussions. Additionally, an adversarial global power gaining influence in the region would mean a direct physical threat to US security should tensions escalate. To this effect, the 2022 US National Security Strategy (NSS) addresses the importance of coordinated regional action and partnership between the US and Latin America and the Caribbean for efforts regarding migration, pandemic response, economy, climate, and democratic governance.<sup>3</sup> The NSS specifically states the importance of the partnerships to “protect against external interference or coercion, including from the PRC, Russia, or Iran,” overtly recognizing the importance of partnership with this region in maintaining the current balance of power and therefore security. Additionally, USSOUTHCOM is a logistically favorable region for trade due to its geographic proximity and US favorability amongst USSOUTHCOM countries, which is necessary to maintain those mutually beneficial trade relationships. The US currently has more free trade partners in USSOUTHCOM than in any other region, and continued trade relationships with some of the fastest growing economic regional powerhouses benefit the US economy in the long-term.<sup>4</sup> US commitment to disaster response would not only address the destabilizing factors of disasters, but it also improves partnerships and favorability within the recipient countries. Prioritizing the improvement of a mechanism for positive influence such as disaster response aid cannot be overlooked with the current state of GPC in USSOUTHCOM. Partnerships between the US and USSOUTHCOM maintaining the favorability and trust of countries

in the region should be a priority for US policy makers as China actively vies to challenge this position through economic influence.

### **US Disaster Response Aid as a Diplomatic Tool**

The term “disaster diplomacy,” coined by Ilan Kelman, has been in use in academic studies since around 2004. This field of study explores the role of disasters and disaster-related activities between countries. Kelman and others suggest that disaster-related activities can be used to “catalyze diplomatic action.”<sup>5</sup> The institutionalization of this theory can be seen overtly in US foreign policy. The US Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended through Public Law 117-263 enacted in December 2022, codifies the willingness of the people of the US to alleviate human suffering caused by disasters and provides funding allocations to do so.<sup>6</sup> The 2022 NSS further cements the use of disaster diplomacy within US foreign policy strategy, starting with the presidential remarks that “the US will continue to prioritize leading the international response to these transnational challenges [i.e., pandemics, climate disasters, among others], together with our partners, even as we face down concerted efforts to remake the ways in which nations relate to one another.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US government lead agency for international disaster response, recognizes in their USSOUTHCOM regional summary report from 2022 that early disaster recovery efforts in the region are a strategic priority for the US. Furthermore, USSOUTHCOM incorporates disaster diplomacy as part of its strategy. In her 2022 statement to the Congressional House Armed Services Committee, General Laura Richardson, Commander of USSOUTHCOM, emphasizes the command’s priority to strengthen partnerships in the region through aid and directly frames this as a necessary measure to outcompete the PRC’s influence in the region. These are just a few of many US foreign policy examples that cement disaster response as a tool for diplomacy in US strategic doctrine.

### **Funding Sources and Process for Executing US Disaster Response**

Understanding the funding authority and process through which disaster response aid is executed is necessary for an analysis of efficacy of the aid and to identify possible areas of change for future US policy. The funding for disaster aid originates from the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961, specifically in Chapter 9, which outlines “International Disaster Assistance.”<sup>8</sup> The bill is annually amended to reflect the amount of funding available for disaster response aid and the approval authority for its use. In the latest amendment to the FAA in

December 2022, Congress approved \$3,905,460,000 of annual funding for fiscal years 2024-2028. The President has authority to execute these funds, but this power is delegated to US Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator. Within USAID, the USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA) holds lead responsibility for allocating and executing the Congressionally approved funds.<sup>9</sup> Additional disaster response funding details are also included in the annual Consolidated Appropriations Act, which allocates a certain amount of funding for security and development spending in USSOUTHCOM, specifically the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), while allowing an annually approved percentage of that funding to be diverted at the discretion of the President "to respond to significant, exigent, or unforeseen events or to address other exceptional circumstances directly related to the national interest." For example, this justification was used by President Trump to divert funds away from the Northern Triangle towards the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela and Hurricane relief in the Caribbean.<sup>10</sup>

Funding from the US Department of Defense (DoD) can also be utilized when needed in accordance with Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) Appropriation given in Title 10 US Code. According to the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "DoD provides...assistance in support of US international disaster response efforts when unique DoD capabilities are required to save human lives." If the DoD has a unique capability needed for disaster response, the Secretary of State can request support from the DoD Executive Secretary and funding can be approved by the Secretary of Defense for "subsequent tasking of the affected Combatant Command (CCMD)." For example, OHDACA funding was used to provide military capability support such as air transportation of aid and personnel during Hurricanes Dorian, Irma, Marie, Eta, and Iota between 2017-2020.<sup>11</sup>

For funding other than OHDACA, there is a standardized process for executing funds in the immediate aftermath of an international disaster. First, the affected country asks for international assistance through the US in-country representative, often an Embassy. Next, the Chief of Mission at the embassy can immediately offer \$100,000 at their discretion without higher approval. If additional funding is required, the Chief of Mission must declare a formal "Declaration of Humanitarian Need" and request additional funding from the USAID/BHA. The following criteria must be met in order to make a Declaration of Humanitarian Need: 1) there must be evidence of significant unmet humanitarian need, 2) US government humanitarian assistance will save lives, reduce human suffering and mitigate the impact of humanitarian emergencies on the most vulnerable, 3) the host country requests or will accept international

assistance, and 4) responding aligns with US government interests and humanitarian objectives.<sup>12</sup> If all these stipulations are met, then funds can be transferred to the in-country representatives for execution. This funding is inherently limited and must be used in a discretionary manner, as disasters cannot always be predictable.

### **Analysis: Does US Disaster Response Aid Positively Impact US Perception in USSOUTHCOM?**

The history of US international disaster response began over two centuries ago in 1812, when the US Congress allocated \$50,000 for the shipment of food to Caracas in the aftermath of an earthquake in Venezuela. This was the earliest known use of disaster aid as a tool to further US foreign relations and interests abroad.<sup>13</sup> Though a plethora of relationship building techniques are in use today within the region, disaster aid remains an important aspect of US foreign relations in USSOUTHCOM due to the region's comparatively high number of natural disasters. Before discussing ways in which the US can optimize disaster response aid as a diplomatic tool, an analysis of how the practice of disaster response aid has historically affected US influence in the region must be performed.

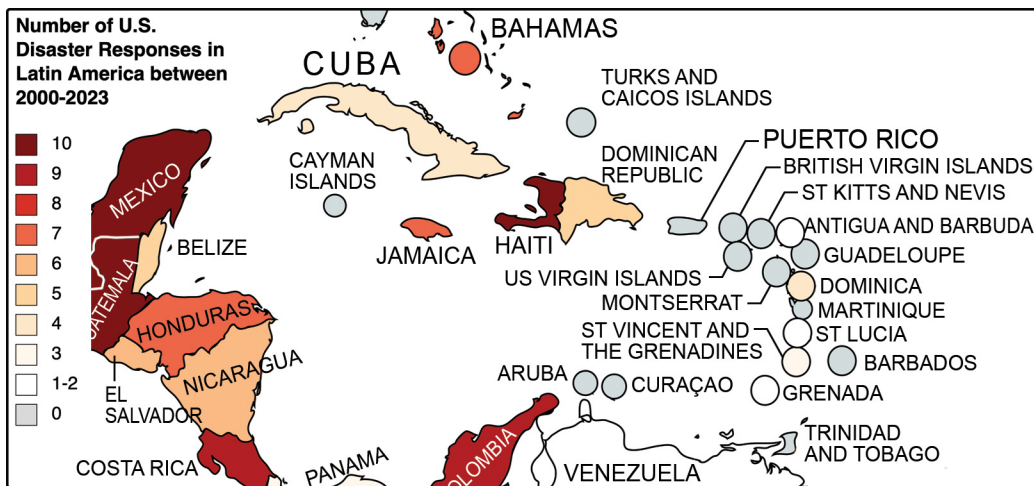


**Figure 1. Frequency of US Disaster Responses in Latin American and Caribbean Countries**

Source: Author, with data from EM-DAT International Disasters Database, 2000-2023

Using raw data, starting from 2000, from the EM-DAT international disasters database and *LatinoBarometro* surveys, this paper will analyze the historical correlation between US disaster response aid and public favorability towards the US as the influential superpower in the region. Though certainly not a static political or economic timeframe, this window allows the analysis of large dynamic global power and economic shifts influencing the data.

According to the EM-DAT international disasters database, there have been 1,566 natural disasters in USSOUTHCOM since the year 2000 and the US has given aid to 32 countries in 151 of those disasters.<sup>14</sup> Figures 1 and 2 show this disaggregated data on a map to display the frequency in which different countries in the region have received US disaster response aid in the past two decades.



**Figure 2. Caribbean Zoom of Frequency of US Disaster Responses in Latin American and Caribbean Countries**

Source: Author, with data from EM-DAT International Disasters Database, 2000-2023

This data was then analyzed in conjunction with *LatinoBarometro* public opinion surveys on feelings towards the US during the same timeframe (the average percentage of favorability towards the US was calculated by adding the “Very Good” and “Good” responses for each of the 17 countries surveyed throughout 20 years). Of the 17 countries where opinion poll data was available, there were 105 occurrences of US disaster response aid.<sup>15</sup> Figure 3 is used to show the correlation between frequency of receiving US disaster response aid and a highly favorable US opinion. An overlay of the annual opinion polls from 2000-2020 with the years in which US disaster response aid was received was used to determine which US disaster aid occurrences resulted in a higher percentage of US favorability the following year and which opinion polls had no change or decreased after aid was received. While a strong correlation is readily apparent in countries such as

Colombia, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, the results show that US favorability increased in 54 out of the 105 occurrences of US disaster response aid. In other words, US disaster response aid had a positive impact on domestic opinion of the US 51.4 percent of the time, an encouraging outcome that supports current US foreign disaster diplomacy.



**Figure 3. Percentage Favorable Opinion of the US in Latin American and Caribbean Countries**

Source: Author, with data from EM-DAT International Disasters Database, 2000-2023

If disaster diplomacy is to be used as a primary tactic for GPC, it would be in the US interest to explore ways to increase the number of positive impacts above the historical 51.4 percent. Before suggesting ways in which that number may

increase, it is necessary to first discuss the application of this quantitative outcome as it relates to disaster diplomacy and the status of GPC between China and the US in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Great Power Competition - China and Disaster Diplomacy**

The US should capitalize on the quantitative support that US disaster response aid can improve its perception and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, as USSOUTHCOM has become a main stage for GPC. In his publication in National Defense University Press, Thomas Lynch summarizes a great power as a country that has comparatively advanced capabilities who uses those capabilities to pursue broad foreign policy interests globally and who is also recognized by other states as a major global power and influence.<sup>16</sup> The 2017 NSS brought the return of GPC into political science discourse, which had been absent since the end of the Cold War.<sup>17</sup> The NSS acknowledged the great powers to be the US, China, and Russia, though other influential states such as Iran are also sometimes considered within this category. For the scope of this paper, the focus is on the competition between China and the US in USSOUTHCOM. Though Russia and other influential countries have strategic foreign policy involvement in USSOUTHCOM, China is currently the nearest competitor in the region, particularly in the arena of foreign assistance, which is the umbrella under which disaster response aid can be placed and the focus of this discussion.

China's intent for disaster aid in USSOUTHCOM and beyond can be discerned by reviewing their public foreign policy documents. China's 2014 policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean, an update from their first policy paper on the topic in 2008, mentions China's commitment to an innovative assistance model, giving priority to "...humanitarian assistance," i.e., intentional disaster response aid, in the context of complimenting their ongoing development projects.<sup>18</sup> However, unlike US development strategy through USAID and other federal agencies' funding for disaster aid, China's broad development agenda, executed through their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has not necessarily corresponded with robust humanitarian aid.

China favors bilateral humanitarian aid to NGOs and multilateral institutions, which is consistent with their messaging of values of non-interference and South-South cooperations.<sup>19</sup> China's contributions to disaster aid through multilateral aid organizations such as the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) have been minimal as a percentage of their overall GDP, with a contribution of only \$500,000 to CERF most years since 2007.<sup>20</sup> However, China's humanitarian spending has peaking several times in recent years, demonstrating the willingness of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to increase disaster response spending. Prior to



COVID, 2017 was its highest year of spending with \$128.5 million, still a fraction of the \$6.89 billion the US spent on humanitarian assistance that same year.<sup>21</sup> The COVID pandemic, however, saw a rise in reported Chinese bilateral disaster aid, to include USSOUTHCOM countries. China provided direct pandemic aid to 17 of the 24 countries that received aid in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2020 and 2021, the second largest donor in the region behind the US.<sup>22</sup>

This information could be used to argue a rise in Chinese foreign disaster response aid to countries where China has an economic interest. However, analysts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies suspect that motivation in the rise in disaster response aid during the COVID-19 pandemic had more to do with reputation mending than directly protecting economic investments. They posit that the spike in disaster response aid to its cooperative countries could have been done to “draw attention away from the Chinese Communist Party’s inadequate early response to the virus.”<sup>23</sup> If this theory is true, it could be the case that a consistent rise in disaster aid spending will not be observed in the near future and the US could expect less competition with China in the use of this diplomatic tool.

### **China’s Progress in other Areas of Regional Influence**

US comparative advantage in disaster response aid is particularly poignant because China is rapidly closing the gap or surpassing the US in other areas of competition for influence in USSOUTHCOM. Both US and Chinese foreign policy doctrine contain explicit strategies for growth of ties in the region. Particularly since their entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, China’s economic efforts in Latin America have drastically increased, with a 31 percent annual increase in trade. China is now the largest trading partner for South America, and is the second largest trading partner, behind the US, for Central America.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, China has free trade agreements with Chile, Peru, and Costa Rica and 20 Latin American countries have signed onto China’s BRI, furthering economic and diplomatic cooperation between China and the BRI countries.<sup>25</sup> In addition to trade, China has significantly increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the USSOUTHCOM AOR. In a matter of six years, China’s annual FDI outflows from USSOUTHCOM went from three percent to upwards of ten percent of total outflows.<sup>26</sup> China’s rapid progression in the areas of economics, trade, and investments leave less available for the US to maintain a strong advantage over China. Thus, the US can utilize disaster aid response as a diplomatic tool to not only build partnerships and influence in USSOUTHCOM, but to ultimately provide relief to people in humanitarian emergencies.

## **Lessons of Covid-19 “Vaccine Diplomacy”**

To streamline the data for the purposes of the quantitative analysis earlier in this article, COVID-19 pandemic aid from the US or China was not included but is now worth considering. COVID-19 “vaccine diplomacy” was a form of disaster response aid which both the US and China donated significantly to USSOUTHCOM countries beginning in 2020. As of April 1, 2022, the US provided approximately 65 million doses of vaccines to the region and mobilized COVID-19 response in 29 countries.<sup>27</sup> Though the US reached more countries and people with its aid, there were lessons to be learned in its race with China to provide vaccines. In a state of emergency, the disaster response aid preferred by countries in the USSOUTHCOM AOR is the aid that comes soonest. COVID-19 illuminated the pragmatism of USSOUTHCOM countries in the need for aid. China was quicker in mobilization of vaccines and Personal Protective Equipment which gained goodwill with leaders in the region because of their promptness and dependability in the crisis.<sup>28</sup> USAID, on the other hand, was slower to mobilize, but took pride in its wholistic response strategy - rather than just give vaccines and medical supplies. USAID aided in implementing and sustaining COVID-19 procedures and care within their USSOUTHCOM operations.<sup>29</sup> This difference in approaches during the pandemic response is an interesting case study in the efficacy of disaster diplomacy. A lesson that can be taken away from this scenario is that aid must be tailored to the needs of the recipient country to effectively be used to further the influence and positive perception of the donor country.

With all these applications considered, it is evident that the growing influence of China in the Western Hemisphere has direct implications for future US national security. For the US to secure its contested primacy as a partner for Latin American and Caribbean states, it is imperative that it increase its resources to policies that effectively build and maintain our partnerships with our neighboring continent, one of which being disaster response aid, as the quantitative analysis in this paper showed. The final section will explore ways this may be best accomplished.

## **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

Past and present US policy has consistently codified the importance of disaster response aid to US strategic foreign policy and national security, as demonstrated in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and beyond.<sup>30</sup> The authority given to USAID/BHA and their immense global reach is also testament to the prioritization of humanitarian aid in US foreign policy. Though funding varies based on annual congressional allocation and presidential utilization of discretionary fund-

ing, disaster response remains a strategic diplomatic and humanitarian tool in the US foreign policy toolkit. Disaster response aid is particularly of interest when considering tactics that give the US an advantage in the GPC environment with China in the USSOUTHCOM AOR. Based on the background provided in this paper, disaster response aid is one of the few aspects of foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean where the US is significantly ahead of China. Additionally, analysis of the impact of disaster response aid on US favorability yielded encouraging results for the direct positive impact of well-executed disaster diplomacy on US regional perception and influence. However, after the boost of China's disaster response aid during COVID-19, the US must be diligent to not lose their position of advantage. The US must emphasize its ability to provide wholistic disaster response aid to its greatest effect. The final section of this article will discuss possible ways in which this can be achieved.

First and foremost, an increase in congressional funding allocation for international disaster assistance would certainly advance the quantity of disaster responses in which the US would be able to assist and therefore further the diplomatic reach of this tool. If funds are executed as well or better than historical patterns, it is possible the aid would improve the recipient country's perception of the US. Additionally, including increased flexibility in the next Consolidated Appropriations Act for unused foreign aid allocations would allow increased discretionary spending, which could be used on disaster response aid. This would work in the same manner as the earlier example of the funds diverted by then President Trump from their original Northern Triangle allocation towards hurricane response efforts.<sup>31</sup> Thus, with increased overall funding and increased flexibility in discretionary spending of other foreign aid allocations, more resources could be invested towards disaster response aid which would positively impact the US influence in this region and would be a positive outcome for long-term US national security.

Second, the US should practice symbolic, if not physical, reciprocity with relief aid offers. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, countries with whom the US does not share strong partnerships, such as Cuba, offered aid, which the US refused. In turn, Cuba refused future offers of aid from the US and the bilateral relationship continued to remain tense.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the US also received offers from India,<sup>33</sup> Israel,<sup>34</sup> and many others, which it accepted. Should situations like these arise in the future, the US should use the disaster as a catalyst to improve diplomatic relations, not to deepen tensions. Whether a country is physically able to supply aid or not, the symbolic acceptance of an aid offer could be an important step towards improving or cementing US relations and thereby maintain a competitive edge with China.

Third, the US should increase humanitarian and disaster response exercises with nations in USSOUTHCOM. General Richardson's address to congress discussed the importance of Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations for achieving USSOUTHCOM objectives to strengthen partnerships and counter threats in the region. Intentionally increasing HA/DR training with our regional partners would not only increase our operational effectiveness during real-world disaster response operations, but it would also enhance our military partnerships and further our competitive edge against China.

In conjunction with increased disaster response spending and flexibility, aid reciprocity, and increased HA/DR exercises, it is critical that US spending continues to support disaster prevention and climate resilience activities, a priority objective outlined by USAID/BHA and in the State Department's Foreign Assistance Manual for Fiscal year 2021. Though disaster response aid currently provides a comparative advantage for the US, the US should further this effort to support increased stability and self-reliance of countries in the Western Hemisphere. As each country improves resiliency with support from the US and their partners, the possibility for China to take advantage of a country's vulnerabilities dwindles, removing an opportunity for China to gain influence. With self-reliance as a priority, US involvement will become less transactional and thus more trusted and accepted, as opposed to China's transactional and exploitative loans.<sup>35</sup>

In the pursuit of the self-reliance and climate resiliency of countries in USSOUTHCOM's AOR, the US should also seek cooperation with China on ongoing disaster prevention and climate resilience development projects, as decreasing tensions between the US and China would only benefit the stability of the region. With an increase in amount and flexibility of international disaster assistance spending, symbolic (or otherwise) reciprocal aid acceptance, increased joint HA/DR training, and a focus on disaster prevention and climate resilience, the US would maximize the effectiveness of this diplomatic tool in the contested USSOUTHCOM AOR. □

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