

Maritime Stability Operations

A Foreign Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
Case Study

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Stability operations are defined as various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States. These missions, tasks, and activities are conducted to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.¹ In other words, stability operations can provide support to governance. Stability operations can range in size from a few people to several thousands of people.² These operations can also be conducted in coordination with several other instruments of national power, which include diplomatic agencies, information agencies, military agencies, and economic powers, such as the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of State, and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.³

Maritime stability operations are a subset of larger stability operations which take advantage of the freedoms that operating from the sea and operating under maritime law provide.⁴ Maritime stability operations are divided into two types, steady state and crisis response.⁵ Steady state stability operations are typically conducted by geographic combatant commanders in the form of exercises, port visits, or peace operations. Crisis response stability operations come in the form of civil support operations, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA), and disaster response. These

operations may involve a country with a legitimate government and/or embassy and occur when ordered by the U.S. government.⁶

Operating from the sea offers a great deal of flexibility in how and where operations can be conducted. Whether operations are conducted by U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard units, alone or along with allied maritime forces, each agency follows a list of tenets set forth for maritime stability operations planning.⁷ This case study presents a FHA crisis response mission which was small in scope but demonstrates planners effectively and efficiently employing the tenets of maritime stability operations to ensure mission effectiveness.

Typhoon Frank

In June of 2008, typhoon Frank (international name: Fengshen)⁸ barreled into the archipelagic waters of the Philippines. Winds, water, and mud devastated the city of Iloilo and her 42 provinces located on Panay Island.⁹ In Hong Kong, the U.S. aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan (Figure 1) and accompanying strike group were in port on a routine liberty call during their scheduled six-month deployment. Upon receiving a request for assistance from the Filipino government through the U.S. Embassy, the U.S. National Command Authority dispatched the Ronald Reagan Strike Group, to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Approximately a day and a half later, the USS Ronald Reagan and her escort ships were on station in the Panay Gulf to begin HADR operations. HADR operations are a core DoD capability that are always conducted in a supporting role assisting other U.S. government agencies. In this case

DoD was supporting the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA).¹⁰



Figure 1. USS Ronald Reagan Aircraft carrier (<http://www.cabatuan.com/tinuom-usnavyshipsonstation.html>)

Upon arrival, the Strike Group Commander immediately went to work meeting with the mayor of Iloilo, Philippine Army representatives, USAID/OFDA, the Philippines National Red Cross (PNRC), and American Embassy country team personnel to prioritize assistance tasks and to differentiate between aid organizations and potential local terrorist groups capable of attacking ships (Figure 2).¹¹



Figure 2. USS Ronald Regan Strike Group Commander coordinating with Embassy Country Team and other disaster relief team members (<http://www.miravite.com/cabatuan-typhoonfrankjun2008-usnavy-004.jpg>).

Planning team members quickly identified that emergency power was needed at the hospital and made that the top priority. Diesel mechanics were dispatched from the USS Ronald Reagan to repair the generator and soon after their arrival, the hospital was operational again. The USS Ronald Reagan supply officer accessed the USAID stores of rice and water that were loaded and stored aboard the ship prior to deploying from San Diego, California. The USS Ronald Reagan's Carrier Onboard Delivery aircraft were designated to shuttle rice, water, and Strike Group staff members from the aircraft carrier to the Iloilo airport. Rice and water were further distributed to remote locations via helicopters from the strike group (Figure 3).

Between June 25 and July 2 2008, helicopters and fixed wing C-2 aircraft, flying approximately 320 sorties, delivered more than 500,000 pounds of relief supplies.¹² A few days into the relief effort, other Military Sealift Command units joined the effort and began coordinating helicopter air support with the Strike Group Airwing staff and conducting search and rescue operations on a ferry that capsized during the storm.¹³ USAID airlifted relief supplies to Iloilo Airport, which were then distributed to affected communities via DoD aircraft. The airlift included 3,360 hygiene kits, 334 rolls of plastic sheeting for temporary shelters, and 6,660 water containers.¹⁴



Figure 3. USAID stores being distributed at Iloilo airport (<https://www.dvidshub.net/image/101829/disaster-relief-wake-typhoon-fengshen>).

Three days after the strike group began HADR operations, Filipino military personnel and aircraft arrived on station with USAID disaster relief supplies.¹⁵ The Strike Group Commander held briefings with Philippine military leaders to update them on the relief operation distribution services that had been provided to date and outlined a plan as the way forward regarding the transfer of HA supply distribution responsibility to the Filipino military. One week after the arrival of the strike group to the Panay Gulf to provide HADR distribution and security operations, the transition from United States to Philippine military responsibility was complete, and the strike group departed the Panay Gulf to continue on its INDOPACOM (then just PACOM) maritime engagement mission.

Analysis

This case study is a good example of how Maritime Stability tenets are incorporated into mission planning to increase mission effectiveness. Maritime stability operations planning doctrine operates under several tenets, to include host nation

involvement, assessment, a comprehensive approach, security, magnitude and duration may vary, and transition lead responsibilities.¹⁶ Accordingly, the next section addresses the tenets with examples in greater detail.

Maritime Stability Operations Tenets

Host Nation Involvement.

Due to past interactions, the U.S. military acquired an arrogant reputation, rushing in and taking charge without including local leaders in the process. host nation involvement is vital to the success of stability operations. Establishing the host nation as a central point in the planning and execution process gives it a sense of ownership in the operation and most importantly, the outcome.

In the case of Panay Island, host nation and USAID/OFDA personnel knew the situation on the ground better than U.S. Embassy personnel and the incoming U.S. Navy planners. The strike group commander and his staff conferred with the Embassy country team, USAID/OFDA, and local host nation leadership to determine what was needed and what should be accomplished, and then set out to satisfy these requests.

Assessment.

Mission success can only occur when the local situation is understood. The assessment of any situation begins from the moment the maritime force receives notification that it will be involved in a stabilizing action and does not end until a complete transition of responsibility has occurred.¹⁷ Assessment typically occurs in two parts, the initial assessment and the operational assessment. The initial assessment can be conducted prior to planning or concurrently with planning. In either case, the

assessment should assume a whole of government approach including host nation personnel, embassy personnel, U.S. governmental and non-governmental organizations, etc., in order to ensure the most in-depth and accurate assessment. The initial assessment then becomes an operational assessment which is continuously updated as the situation changes. Iterative assessments are necessary as a measure of effectiveness; to wit, the achievement of goals, events, and milestones.¹⁸

In this case, most of the initial assessment occurred concurrently with planning. When meeting with local host nation authorities and the USAID/OFDA planners, the strike group staff conducted an initial assessment in order to determine mission objectives and to set mutually agreed priorities. Due to the size and scope of the HADR effort, the assessment included the local authorities and personnel from the U.S. Navy, a U.S. Military Sealift Command ship, the U.S. Embassy, USAID/OFDA, PNRC, and the Philippine Army. Update briefings, based on continuous operational assessments, occurred twice a day (morning and evening), in order to keep all involved agencies apprised of the continuously changing humanitarian aid and threat situation.

Comprehensive Approach.

Maritime Stability Operations traditionally involve more than one organization in order to increase effectiveness.¹⁹ When entering into any stability operation, such as Panay Island, the planning effort should take a whole of government approach. This approach includes the government and civilian entities of the country with lead responsibility and the government and civilian entities of the host nation. Taking a

comprehensive approach ensures the greatest amount of information and the greatest number of options are available to the planning team.

In the Panay Island case, this comprehensive approach included consideration of the capabilities brought by the strike group ships, aircraft, and personnel, the Military Sealift Command ship, and the Filipino people and government. The priorities set during the initial assessment took into account the capabilities of the strike group ships and personnel and achieved unity of effort among military and civilian personnel rendering aid and assistance to the storm victims .

Security.

Maritime Stability Operations doctrine considers humanitarian relief and emergency reconstruction of critical infrastructure a secondary, yet no less important, role of U.S. naval forces.²⁰ Natural disasters can lead to instability by providing opportunities for transnational criminal and terrorist groups.²¹ Citizens turned desperate by their situation can also cause instability by interfering with HADR operations and pilfering HADR resources. Fortunately, the quick and effective HADR operation precluded spoiler activities. Naval forces are typically well suited to provide FHA due to their forward presence and their organic resources, which can simultaneously restore basic civil services and provide a degree of security. Operating from the sea also means that assisting personnel do not compete for critical, limited supplies.

While providing humanitarian relief, security must be established and maintained. Due to its unique geographical nature, numerous terrorist factions find

safe haven in the Philippines, the largest and most capable being the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Therefore it was crucial to provide aid and restore critical infrastructure on the island rapidly before ASG could make inroads and establish a foothold on the island, as well as stifling attempts to attack strike group ships or personnel.²²

In the Panay Island case, the combat ready strike group forces provided a secure environment in the affected area, allowing the other stability related HADR efforts to proceed unfettered. In this instance, local terrorist groups from neighboring islands could not encroach on the affected area, and those who required rice, water, or other types of aid could receive it, thereby diminishing robbery and hoarding, which feeds a black market.²³ Sometimes, no matter how great the effort, this will invariably happen.

Magnitude and Duration May Vary.

Every stability operation is unique in terms of magnitude and duration. In any case, it is always best to plan for the worst and hope for the best. Planning for stability operations is dependent on the initial assessment, which in early stages might have several assumptions and even conjectures. It makes good sense to plan conservatively and estimate a larger required initial response then pare down appropriately, as opposed to planning for a smaller initial response, which might result in insufficient resources and an extended HADR operation.

In the aftermath of typhoon Frank, a sufficient amount of information was made available to planners by the Embassy country team and Filipino authorities which allowed the strike group staff the opportunity to plan a right-sized regional response that included all available resources in the strike group.

Transition Lead Responsibility.

The sooner the lead responsibility is transferred to local authorities, the sooner they can provide their own safe and secure environment, provide essential services, and continue rendering aid and relief to their citizens.²⁴ Close coordination with State Department personnel helps with the planning and coordination of the transition when the host nation is ready.²⁵

Once Philippine Army leadership was able to mobilize aircraft and personnel fully, the strike group commander began the transition of lead responsibility of distribution operations. Since embassy personnel, including the ambassador, USAID/OFDA, and PNRC, were involved in the operation from the beginning, the transition to host nation authorities progressed smoothly.

Conclusion

FHA missions, as the Panay Island case illustrates, do a great deal to promote local and regional stability.²⁶ Based on this, it is important that maritime forces, in particular their staff planners, are properly prepared to conduct planning and execution of such operations. In addition to being combat ready, it is just as important to be able to conduct any and all types of maritime stability operations. Notably, DoD has directed military forces to treat stability operations as a core military mission, which they shall be prepared to conduct with the proficiency of combat operations.²⁷

The crisis response HADR mission that the USS Ronald Reagan Strike Group conducted in the Philippines was relatively simple yet moderately complex at the same time. It was simple in that the units providing assistance conducted what equated to

routine logistics operations. Flight crews delivered goods and services from one point to the next in a permissible, non-combat environment. It was moderately complex in that even though this was a small operation, there was a great deal of coordination required among the strike group staff, USAID/OFDA, the individual units tasked for support, the Embassy country team, the local Philippine authorities, and the Philippine Army. This coordination was important in that the U.S. naval forces leading the humanitarian response were not viewed as overstepping their role and only provided the assistance where the assistance was needed and requested. The fast and efficient transfer of lead responsibility also added to the complexity of the response.

Ensuring the incoming Philippine Army leadership and Embassy country team were kept apprised of the situation and given a thorough pass down of information during the turnover was a priority for the strike group commander throughout the relief effort. Additionally, the threat of terrorist action against the personnel rendering assistance to the Philippine people added to the complexity of the effort. This threat needed to be taken into account during all stages of planning and execution.

In order to become proficient in conducting stability operations, it is imperative that training exercises for planners include diverse scenarios. A recommended course of action for combatant command leadership to follow would be to have incoming Strike Group Staff planners participate in a series of tabletop exercises (TTXs) either prior to arriving in theater or while in theater in order to properly prepare them for similar maritime stability operation scenarios like Iloilo. These TTXs can be held internal to the strike group staff, facilitated by combatant command staff, or facilitated

by the Maritime Stability Operations Advisor from the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute. These exercises would take the staff through an initial scenario and then run them through the Joint Operations Planning Process (JOPP) of mission analysis, Course of Action (COA) development, and COA analysis and war gaming to sharpen staff members critical thinking skills.²⁸ It is not necessary to exercise the entire strike group, since what individual units do in these stability operations is no different than what they do on a daily basis. Logistics, flight operations, maritime security, command and control, and other mission areas are all missions, which carrier strike group personnel (including expeditionary strike group personnel) are especially skilled and proficient at performing. However, since there are a myriad of scenarios that a planning staff could be presented with, providing deploying and/or deployed staffs with time away from distractions to focus solely on a given stability operation scenario would serve to keep their planning and critical thinking skills sharp. This training would increase their knowledge and experience of working with the maritime stability operations planning tenets in order to be ready for anything they could be presented with.

As presented in this article, even a small FHA mission benefits from following the maritime stability operations tenets. A staff of planners, proficient in the joint operational planning process and knowledgeable of the aforementioned tenets, is key to a well lead and well managed stability operation, irrespective of the type, size, or scope. Training to and following these time-tested maritime stability operations tenets will all but ensure an effective mission outcome.

Endnotes

¹ United States Navy (2016), NWP 3-07, Maritime Stability Operations, 2016.

² *ibid.*, 1-4.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Marcos Detourista, "Iloilo Flood – Typhoon Frank Ravages Iloilo," accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.exploreiloilo.com/blog/typhoon-frankfengshen-ravages-iloilo-philippines/>.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff (2019), Joint Publication 3-29, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, vii.

¹¹ "US carrier marks anniversary of typhoon Frank in Iloilo," ABS CBN News, accessed December 4, 2020, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/regions/06/21/09/us-carrier-marks-anniversary-typhoon-frank-iloilo>.

¹² USAID Fact Sheet #2 (final) Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA) Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) Philippines – Typhoon, Fact Sheet #2, Fiscal Year (FY) 2008, July 3, 2008, accessed January 5, 2021,

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/1D0AE57095D73AF24925747C0003186B-Full_Report.pdf

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Maritime, 1-9.

¹⁷ Maritime, 3-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-9

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*, 1-6.

²¹ *ibid.*, 2-4.

²² Abu Sayyaf, 2.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Maritime, 1-10.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, I-4.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 1-5.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 3-7.