

Opinion | Global collaboration will improve India's mitigation initiatives

24 Jul 2019, [Sreeram Chaulia](#)



If India is a leader in preventing deaths in disasters, it is not so adept in protecting infrastructure from extreme weather.

CDRI could be the next major foreign policy innovation in the Modi Doctrine

Can India, which has earned a reputation for effectively mitigating and managing natural disasters at home, provide international leadership in preparing for and coping with calamities worldwide?

This is the underlying premise of a diplomatic push by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in setting up a global Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) with a funding pledge of ₹480 crore (\$70 million). Modi used the G20 summit in Osaka to promote the idea and invite greater international participation. His vision is of CDRI acting as a convening body that pools best practices and resources from around the world for reshaping construction, transportation, energy, telecommunication and water, so that building in these core infrastructure sectors factors in natural catastrophes.

CDRI could fill a real gap at a time when climate change-induced floods, cyclones and fires have multiplied in destructive force. Suppose a disaster strikes a country, the affected nation could approach CDRI for technical and financial help, thus shielding it from excessive damage and devastation. Post-calamity resuscitation and reconstruction to strengthen local infrastructure and soften the blow of the next disaster, is a farsighted approach. It can only work if there is domestic political will, which is reinforced at the multilateral level through CDRI.

There are parallels between CDRI and the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which was launched in 2015 as Modi's brainchild to accelerate the historic energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables. ISA has enhanced India's soft power by positioning it as a contributor of solutions to the most pressing global problems.

CDRI could be the next major foreign policy innovation in the Modi Doctrine to enhance India's status by serving the needs of the rest of the world. Although India suffers from poor urban and rural planning, it is also being recognized as a world leader in saving lives during natural catastrophes. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) has praised India as a pioneering role model for drawing up a national and local strategy to reduce disaster losses and risks.

If India is a world leader in preventing human deaths in disasters, it is not so adept in protecting property and infrastructure from extreme weather havoc. This is where CDRI is looking to tap into the expertise of Japan. During Modi's bilateral with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during on the sidelines of the Osaka G20 summit, the Indian leader sought Japan's assistance in disaster resilient infrastructure and termed the Japanese role as "crucial because of its experience in disaster management, rehabilitation and reconstruction".

Japan is prone to recurrent killer earthquakes, tsunamis and typhoons, but it has overcome these liabilities through improved building rules, stricter zoning laws and regulations since the 1980s, making it the world's safest and most disaster-resilient country. In Latin America, Chile has similarly learnt lessons from past catastrophes and drastically cut down casualties and losses from disasters through well-regulated building standards. India is therefore looking at Japan to guide CDRI and also tie in disaster-resilient criteria into Japanese foreign aid to developing countries. China remains the indisputable global number one in infrastructure construction and finance, but its humongous Belt and Road Initiative is not known for environmentally-sound or disaster-proof projects. Japan and India could offer an alternative paradigm in quality infrastructure that is humane and safe. An Indo-Japanese push via the vehicle of CDRI makes eminent humanitarian and geopolitical sense.

Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs.