

GET OVER THE SUPERPOWER SYNDROME

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

The current debate on whether [foreign assistance should be accepted](#) for relief and reconstruction work following the devastating floods in Kerala is an unnecessary distraction for the Central and State governments at a time of a grave crisis. The need now is to use all assistance, Indian and foreign, to rebuild Kerala. The figures being bandied about will not meet even a fraction of the cost of rebuilding the infrastructure and bringing the State to normalcy. Bilateral and multilateral assistance will take a long time in coming, and the sooner we make up our mind the better. Seeing ghosts of spies, interventionists and terrorists will not help us recover and be productive once again.

It was the United Progressive Alliance government that decided [not to seek external assistance for disaster relief](#) — from foreign countries or even the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The context of that decision was India's superpower dream. It was felt that India should demonstrate that it had the strength to withstand and counter calamities and also help its neighbours, as it did in the case of the [December 2004 tsunami](#) and piracy attacks in the Indian Ocean. India had felt that this would strengthen its case for seeking to be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and also hasten the prospect of superpower status by 2020. Since permanent membership of the Security Council entails additional financial commitment on its part, India's low level of mandatory contribution to the UN, calculated based on its capacity to pay, was also a matter of concern at that time. India thought it would be beneficial for it if it were to show that it was spending money abroad over and above the mandatory contribution.

But the policy of not accepting foreign assistance has not taken India even one step towards fulfilling its ambitions. It has been given admission into the Australia Group and the [Wassenaar Arrangement](#) it did not want, and the Missile Technology Control Regime because its system of missile control was unmatchable, but not membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or even the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

The other concern was the old fear of the foreign hand, the spies who would come with the package, interfere in the country's internal affairs, and also take away valuable information. The development of technology is such that foreigners do not need to come in hordes to India to know what is happening or to influence decision-making here. Google and Facebook know more about us than we do, and are capable of manipulating our national priorities and plans. India should not be mixing up its 20th century fears with the realities of the 21st century.

The assistance from the UN and Red Cross are of less concern. India has been the biggest contributor to the UN Development Programme and the biggest recipient of assistance. It is a party to the regulations of the UN and its conditionalities for assistance. It is true that India does not want foreigners with huge UN salaries to come and destroy the morale of its relief workers. But its needs for technology and best practices can be obtained from the UN by careful planning and consultations. India will also be able to choose the nationalities of the people it deploys. Nothing should stop it from getting what it needs from the UN, as they can raise the funds and source them from anywhere.

In the case of bilateral assistance, India needs to examine offers case by case. The reported offer from the United Arab Emirates of 700 crore makes Abu Dhabi a bigger donor than New Delhi. This is not a casual offer routinely made. First of all, the UAE authorities genuinely felt

grieved over the calamity that hit Keralites, who have served their country well over the years. They felt obliged to help Kerala at a time of distress in accordance with the Islamic faith. Similar is the case of Qatar, which has offered 35 crore.

The news that the Government of India would decline the offer came like a tornado after the flood. Such a decision will be very unpopular in Kerala and it will affect the electoral fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Such an inflexible attitude on the basis of an earlier decision will not be appreciated. This may also have a negative impact on India's relations with the UAE, whose authorities were directly involved in raising the funds and in conveying the offer to the Prime Minister.

Now there are reports that the gift from the UAE has not been rejected out of hand. This would be wise. India should also hold discussions with the UN and the Red Cross with a view to formulating plans for reconstruction using the latest technology and international best practices. It should set aside its superpower syndrome at a time of national emergency.

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