

Research Paper

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Disaster Diplomacy in Action: The 2019 Albania Earthquake and the Geopolitics of Humanitarian Aid

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Abstract

The intersection of natural disasters and international diplomacy has gained increasing attention as humanitarian assistance becomes a strategic tool in foreign policy. While disaster response efforts are often framed as humanitarian necessities, they are frequently shaped by geopolitical interests, economic imperatives, and security considerations. This article examines the concept of disaster diplomacy by analyzing how states engage in humanitarian action to strengthen alliances, project soft power, and influence regional stability. Through a case study of the 2019 Albania earthquake, the paper explores how international responses—particularly from Greece, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States—reflect broader diplomatic dynamics in the Balkans. While disaster relief can serve as a catalyst for improved bilateral relations, its effectiveness in fostering long-term diplomatic stability remains uncertain.

Despite growing academic interest in disaster diplomacy, critical knowledge gaps persist, particularly regarding the sustainability of diplomatic gains achieved through humanitarian interventions. The absence of a structured framework for integrating humanitarian aid into foreign policy planning complicates the assessment of its long-term impact. Institutional coordination challenges, the role of non-state actors, and the politicization of aid further influence the effectiveness of disaster diplomacy. This article highlights the need for comprehensive research on the geopolitical dimensions of humanitarian assistance and calls for better integration of disaster diplomacy into global governance frameworks. Strengthening institutional coordination, enhancing regional disaster response mechanisms, and conducting longitudinal studies on the diplomatic effects of humanitarian aid are essential for refining both policy and

practice. Addressing these challenges will ensure that disaster diplomacy contributes not only to crisis response but also to sustainable international cooperation.

Keywords: *Disaster diplomacy, foreign policy, international relations, geopolitical strategy, crisis response, bilateral cooperation, Albania earthquake.*

Περίληψη

Η αλληλεπίδραση των φυσικών καταστροφών με τη διεθνή διπλωματία έχει προσελκύσει ολοένα και μεγαλύτερο ενδιαφέρον, καθώς η ανθρωπιστική βοήθεια μετατρέπεται σε στρατηγικό εργαλείο εξωτερικής πολιτικής. Παρότι οι δράσεις αντιμετώπισης καταστροφών παρουσιάζονται συνήθως ως ανθρωπιστικές αναγκαιότητες, συχνά διαμορφώνονται από γεωπολιτικά συμφέροντα, οικονομικές επιταγές και ζητήματα ασφάλειας. Το παρόν άρθρο εξετάζει το φαινόμενο της «διπλωματίας των καταστροφών» αναλύοντας τον τρόπο με τον οποίο τα κράτη αξιοποιούν την ανθρωπιστική δράση για την ενίσχυση συμμαχιών, την προβολή ισχύος και τον τρόπο που αυτή επηρεάζει την περιφερειακή σταθερότητα. Μέσα από τη μελέτη του σεισμού της Αλβανίας το 2019, το άρθρο διερευνά πώς οι διεθνείς ανταποκρίσεις, ιδίως από την Ελλάδα, την Τουρκία, την Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση και τις Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες, αντανακλούν ευρύτερες διπλωματικές δυναμικές στα Βαλκάνια. Αν και η ανθρωπιστική βοήθεια μπορεί να λειτουργήσει ως καταλύτης για τη βελτίωση των διμερών σχέσεων, η αποτελεσματικότητά της στη διασφάλιση μακροπρόθεσμης διπλωματικής σταθερότητας παραμένει αβέβαιη.

Παρά το αυξανόμενο ακαδημαϊκό ενδιαφέρον για τη διπλωματία των καταστροφών, εξακολουθούν να υφίστανται σημαντικά ερευνητικά κενά, ιδίως ως προς τη βιωσιμότητα των διπλωματικών οφελών που προκύπτουν από ανθρωπιστικές παρεμβάσεις. Η απουσία δομημένου πλαισίου ενσωμάτωσης της ανθρωπιστικής βοήθειας στον στρατηγικό σχεδιασμό εξωτερικής πολιτικής δυσχεραίνει την αξιολόγηση των μακροπρόθεσμων επιπτώσεών της. Επιπλέον, προκλήσεις θεσμικού συντονισμού, ο ρόλος των μη-κρατικών παραγόντων και η πολιτικοποίηση της βοήθειας επηρεάζουν περαιτέρω την αποτελεσματικότητα της διπλωματίας των καταστροφών. Το άρθρο υπογραμμίζει την ανάγκη για πιο ολοκληρωμένη έρευνα των γεωπολιτικών διαστάσεων της ανθρωπιστικής βοήθειας και προτείνει καλύτερη ενσωμάτωση της διπλωματίας των καταστροφών στα πλαίσια παγκόσμιας διακυβέρνησης. Η ενίσχυση του θεσμικού συντονισμού, η βελτίωση των περιφερειακών μηχανισμών απόκρισης και η διεξαγωγή διαχρονικών μελετών σχετικά με τις διπλωματικές επιπτώσεις της ανθρωπιστικής βοήθειας είναι απαραίτητα βήματα για τη βελτίωση της πολιτικής και της πρακτικής. Η αντιμετώπιση αυτών των προκλήσεων θα διασφαλίσει ότι η διπλωματία των καταστροφών συμβάλλει όχι μόνο στην άμεση κρίση, αλλά και στη βιώσιμη διεθνή συνεργασία.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: *Διπλωματία καταστροφών, εξωτερική πολιτική, διεθνείς σχέσεις, γεωπολιτική στρατηγική, διαχείριση κρίσεων, διμερής συνεργασία, σεισμός Αλβανία*

1 Introduction: Natural Disasters and Humanitarian Diplomacy

Natural disasters are among the most severe challenges faced by modern societies, causing significant human, economic, and political disruptions. From hurricanes and earthquakes to wildfires and tsunamis, these events test the resilience of nations and necessitate swift international responses. The increasing frequency and intensity of such disasters, driven by climate change and urbanization, have placed disaster management at the center of global policy discussions (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2015). Beyond their immediate humanitarian impact, natural disasters often become turning points in international relations, influencing diplomatic engagements and shaping foreign policy strategies.

Humanitarian aid is a crucial mechanism for mitigating the consequences of disasters, providing immediate relief and supporting long-term recovery efforts. The European Council defines humanitarian aid as material and logistical assistance directed toward populations affected by crises, including natural and human-made disasters (European Commission, 2025). Unlike development assistance, which focuses on long-term socio-economic improvements, humanitarian aid prioritizes rapid intervention to save lives, preserve dignity, and restore essential services. The coordination of such aid falls under the purview of several global institutions, including the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which oversee disaster response at an international level (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1991).

The legal framework governing humanitarian response has evolved significantly over time, incorporating key international agreements and policies. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) sets global priorities for minimizing disaster risks, emphasizing preparedness, resilience-building, and early warning systems (UNDRR, 2015). At the regional level, the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) plays a crucial role in coordinating assistance among EU member states and neighboring countries (European Commission, 2025). Despite these efforts, gaps remain in the international legal landscape. The absence of a binding International Disaster Law Treaty has led to reliance on non-binding instruments, such as the Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance (IDRL Guidelines), which outline best practices but lack enforceability (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC], 2007).

Beyond the immediate humanitarian response, natural disasters have broader geopolitical implications. They can serve as catalysts for diplomatic engagement, fostering cooperation between states that might otherwise be in conflict. The concept of disaster diplomacy highlights how nations leverage humanitarian aid to strengthen bilateral relations, as seen in numerous historical cases, such as the 2019 earthquake in Albania, which prompted extensive regional and international assistance, reshaping diplomatic relations in the region (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). Conversely, disasters can also exacerbate tensions when international aid efforts become entangled with political agendas, resource competition, or governance challenges (IFRC, 2018).

This article explores the intersection of natural disasters, humanitarian aid, and diplomacy, analyzing how disaster response mechanisms influence international relations. It examines the role of humanitarian aid in foreign policy, the legal frameworks governing disaster management, and the broader implications of disaster diplomacy. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical case studies, the discussion seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how disaster response extends beyond humanitarian concerns to shape global political dynamics.

1.1 Humanitarian Aid and Natural Disasters: Institutional Frameworks and Legal Mechanisms

Humanitarian aid is a fundamental component of disaster response, providing immediate relief, stabilizing affected populations, and supporting recovery efforts. The European Council and the Council of the European Union define humanitarian aid as material and logistical support directed toward populations affected by crises, including natural disasters and armed conflicts. Unlike development assistance, which focuses on long-term socio-economic stabilization, humanitarian aid is an emergency response mechanism. The debate over integrating humanitarian assistance with development strategies has gained momentum, particularly following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which highlighted the necessity of linking short-term relief with long-term resilience (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016). However, this nexus approach has drawn criticism for potentially undermining the core principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (D+C, Development and Cooperation, 2018).

The nexus approach –the approach of linking humanitarian aid and development strategies – has been heavily criticised because of the risk of undermining the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. The politicisation of humanitarian action

is a key issue, as its integration into state or international development programs often leads to its manipulation for geopolitical or strategic purposes (Barnett, 2013). In Syria, for example, it has been documented that regime authorities control the flow of aid by excluding certain areas and ensuring that resources are only allocated to populations under their control (Slim and Trombetta, 2014). This not only undermines the neutrality of humanitarian aid but also reinforces inequalities in access to resources, exacerbating social and political instability (Hall et al, 2021).

Corruption and diversion of humanitarian resources are critical issues related to linking humanitarian aid to development strategies. In conflict environments, humanitarian aid often ends up with armed groups rather than the actual beneficiaries, creating incentives for continued violence (Kivimäki, 2019). In Yemen, the World Food Programme estimated that a significant part of humanitarian aid shipments was diverted to support armed Houthi rebel activity (Elayah et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2022). Similarly, between 2015 and 2019, USAID's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) documented 358 incidents of corruption, diversion of funds, bribery, and misuse of humanitarian aid in operations in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, underscoring the broad scope of the problem (Jenkins, 2024).

Humanitarian organizations are often faced with the dilemma of balancing the need to provide immediate assistance with the need to reduce corruption. The pressure for rapid response often leads to increased tolerance of corruption, as access to populations in crisis is prioritized over control mechanisms (Strand, 2020). In cases where humanitarian assistance is integrated into development strategies, the risk of diversion by political or military actors increases, exacerbating insecurity rather than contributing to stabilization (Maxwell et al., 2012).

The lack of in-depth knowledge of local political-economic conditions by humanitarian organisations exacerbates these problems. OECD donors increased humanitarian funding to authoritarian regimes by a factor of 19 between 2010 and 2019, without clear mechanisms for monitoring the management of funds (OECD, 2022). This has led to further destabilisation, as in many cases aid does not reach the populations most in need, but rather government actors who use it for political purposes (Haver and Carter, 2016). Overall, linking humanitarian aid to development strategies poses serious risks as it can reinforce the phenomena of political manipulation, corruption and diversion of resources, making it necessary to ensure strong accountability and transparency mechanisms.

The global humanitarian response system is composed of governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The United Nations (UN) plays a central role in disaster relief coordination through the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (United Nations, Deliver Humanitarian Aid). OCHA oversees large-scale disaster responses, ensuring efficient cooperation among humanitarian actors. Other key agencies include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which focuses on long-term recovery and resilience-building, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which provides assistance to displaced populations, and the World Food Programme (WFP), which delivers emergency food aid. The World Health Organization (WHO) plays a crucial role in medical responses to disasters, particularly in disease prevention, emergency medical care, and mental health support (International Organization for Migration, IOM). Meanwhile, the role of NGOs, private actors, and regional organizations in disaster response continues to expand, reflecting the decentralization of humanitarian governance and the challenges of maintaining consistent policy frameworks across jurisdictions (Alexander, 2002). Additionally, the role of cross-border cooperation in humanitarian response has gained prominence, as disasters increasingly have regional implications requiring coordinated international intervention (Hannigan, 2013).

Beyond the UN system, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement remain one of the largest humanitarian networks worldwide. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) leads global disaster relief efforts, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ensures compliance with humanitarian principles in conflict zones. Meanwhile, NGOs, religious organizations, and civil society groups play an integral role in bridging gaps in humanitarian response, particularly in regions with limited governmental capacity (Natoli, 2018). Despite their contributions, the legal framework governing international disaster response remains fragmented, as no legally binding international treaty currently exists to regulate cross-border humanitarian aid efforts (Bartolini, 2017). Scholars argue that gaps in legal frameworks create operational inefficiencies and hinder effective coordination among humanitarian actors (Caron, Kelly, and Telesetsky, 2014).

Natural disasters are extreme events resulting from geophysical, meteorological, or climatological hazards. A disaster occurs when a natural hazard exceeds a community's ability to cope, leading to loss of life, economic disruption, and environmental degradation (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182). The severity of a

disaster is determined by both the scale of the hazard and the vulnerability of the affected population. Factors such as poverty, weak infrastructure, and ineffective governance amplify disaster impacts (Marasco, Kammouh, and Cimellaro, 2022). The classification of natural disasters includes earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, wildfires, floods, landslides, and volcanic eruptions (Coburn, Spence, and Pomonis, 1992). Additionally, advancements in early warning systems have played a crucial role in reducing disaster mortality and enabling more effective response strategies (Basher, 2006). However, the uneven global distribution of disaster risk reduction resources highlights persistent disparities in disaster preparedness efforts between high- and low-income countries (Gould, Garcia, and Remes, 2016).

The legal framework for international disaster response consists of non-binding resolutions, guidelines, and regional agreements. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 46/182, adopted in 1991, established fundamental humanitarian principles, reinforcing the need for neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian assistance (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182). Despite these efforts, the lack of a binding international treaty on disaster relief remains a major challenge (Bartolini, 2017). The International Disaster Response Law (IDRL), developed by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), provides guidelines for facilitating and regulating international disaster assistance, yet these guidelines remain voluntary rather than legally enforceable (Bartolini, 2017). Scholars have argued that the continued absence of legal enforcement mechanisms in humanitarian response enables donor states to use disaster relief selectively as a tool for diplomatic leverage, often prioritizing aid based on political rather than humanitarian considerations (Fisher, 2007). Moreover, foreign aid is increasingly viewed as a geopolitical instrument, as states use humanitarian assistance to strengthen diplomatic ties, improve international standing, and exert influence over recipient countries (Apodaca, 2017).

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) provides the most comprehensive global strategy for disaster preparedness, resilience-building, and risk reduction. The framework emphasizes early warning systems, improved urban planning, and enhanced international cooperation (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182). However, challenges persist, including state sovereignty concerns, inconsistent national disaster laws, and difficulties in cross-border coordination (Fischer, 2007). At the diplomatic level, disaster diplomacy has become a key tool in fostering international cooperation, yet scholars question whether post-disaster diplomatic engagements lead to sustained political rapprochement or merely serve as

temporary alignments during crisis response (Kelman, 2016). The case of Albania's 2019 earthquake response highlights both the strengths and limitations of regional cooperation in disaster response, as assistance was mobilized quickly, but long-term recovery challenges persist (Andonov et al., 2022).

The 2019 earthquake in Albania was chosen as the main case study, mainly because of Greece's immediate and substantial response to the relief effort, which highlighted the dynamics of disaster diplomacy in the Balkans. Greece was one of the first countries to send rescue teams, technical support and humanitarian aid, strengthening its relations with Albania in an environment where the history of bilateral relations has often been complex. Greek assistance took on particular significance not only because of the immediate need for support, but also because of the way in which it was perceived by both the Albanian government and public opinion. In a geopolitical context where Greek-Albanian relations are characterised by issues such as the rights of the Greek minority, the delimitation of maritime zones and political developments in the Western Balkans, practical Greek solidarity was a positive benchmark in bilateral relations. Additional scientific contributions documenting the 2019 Albania earthquake—particularly from Greek and regional researchers—may also be incorporated to strengthen the geophysical and seismological context of the case study (Papadopoulos et al., 2020; Ganas et al., 2020; Lekkas et al., 2019; Moshou et al., 2019, Theodoulidis et al., 2022).

Comparison with other cases can contribute to a fuller understanding of the dynamics of disaster diplomacy. For example, Greece's response to Turkey's devastating earthquake in 1999 and the subsequent 'earthquake diplomacy' (Hall, 2015) that followed between the two countries is a classic example of how humanitarian aid can improve bilateral relations, even between historical rivals. Similarly, the case of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, where aid from India and China was seen as part of a competition for regional influence (Biswas, 2015; Johnson, 2015) illustrates the geopolitical implications of humanitarian diplomacy. Therefore, the case of Greek aid to Albania in 2019 is not only a humanitarian event, but also a diplomatic tool that can influence future relations between the two countries. Greece's reaction has shown that disaster diplomacy can act as a mechanism of rapprochement and improve the climate of cooperation, especially when accompanied by sincere and long-term intentions.

2 Diplomatic Responses to Disaster: The Case of the 2019 Albania Earthquake

On November 26, 2019, a 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck northwestern Albania, causing widespread devastation in the cities of Durrës, Thumanë, and Tirana. The tremor, which lasted 24 seconds, was the strongest earthquake to hit the country in over 40 years and resulted in 51 fatalities, over 3,000 injuries, and 17,000 people displaced from their homes (USGS, 2019). The destruction of critical infrastructure, including residential buildings, schools, and hospitals, further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis (Bilgin et al. 2020). The scale of the disaster necessitated an urgent international response, highlighting the role of disaster diplomacy in crisis management (Kelman, 2016).



Figure 1. Countries providing humanitarian assistance to Albania after the 26 November 2019 earthquake (including Greece, Turkey, Italy, Serbia, Romania, the United States, EU member states, and others). Reproduced from Newsletter of Environmental, Disaster, and Crises Management Strategies, issue No. 15 / November 2019, with permission.



THE NOVEMBER 26, 2019, Mw 6.4 DURRËS EARTHQUAKE-AFFECTED AREA

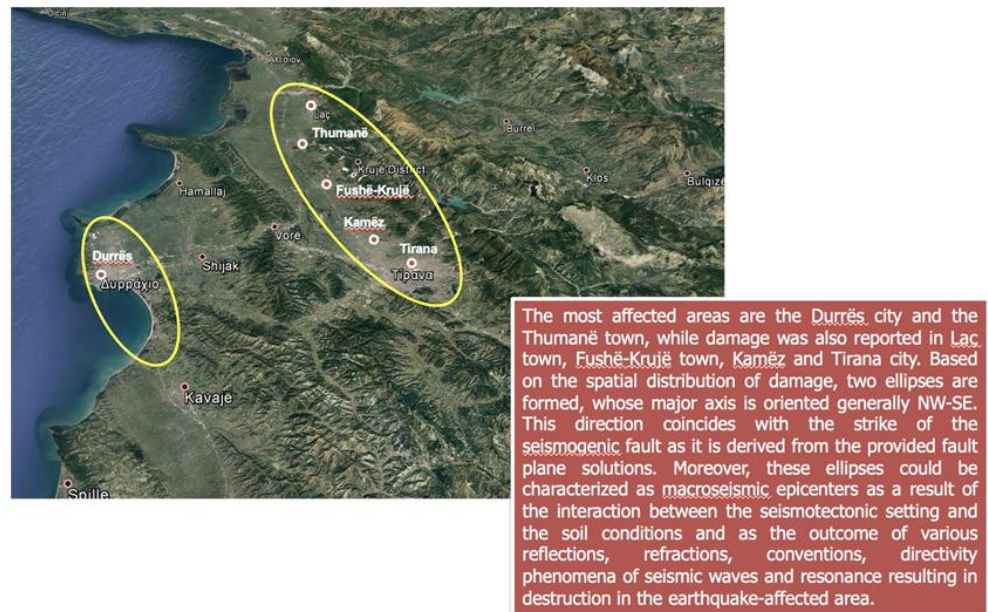


Figure 2. Map of the Durrës–Thumanë–Tirana region illustrating the spatial distribution of damage and affected zones during the 2019 earthquake. Reproduced from Newsletter of Environmental, Disaster, and Crises Management Strategies, issue No. 15 / November 2019, with permission.



Figure 3. Representative images from the affected urban areas showing building collapse, emergency response operations, or infrastructural damage. Reproduced from Newsletter of Environmental, Disaster, and Crises Management Strategies, issue No. 15 / November 2019, with permission.

In response to the disaster, the Albanian government activated the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (EUCPM), requesting international humanitarian assistance. Within hours, emergency response teams, engineers, and financial aid began arriving from neighboring and global partners, demonstrating how disasters often serve as catalysts for diplomatic engagement (Streich and Mislan, 2014).

The diplomatic consequences of the earthquake were significant. Countries with historically complex relationships with Albania, such as Greece, Serbia, and Turkey, used humanitarian assistance as a means to reinforce bilateral ties. Meanwhile, the United States and the European Union, long-standing supporters of Albania's Euro-Atlantic integration, saw the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen political and economic engagement with the country (Razak et al. 2019). The European Union played a central role in coordinating international relief efforts. The EU Civil Protection Mechanism (EUCPM) facilitated the deployment of search-and-rescue teams from Italy, Greece, and Romania, along with financial support for reconstruction efforts (The Brussels Times, 2019). In collaboration with the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC), the EU conducted structural damage assessments, ensuring that financial aid was allocated based on priority needs (Freddi et al., 2021). The United States also played a key role, focusing on technical support and financial aid. American engineers conducted damage assessments in three major Albanian cities using a new methodology that combined best practices from the EUCPM, INSARAG (International Search and Rescue Advisory Group), and UNDAC. Additionally, the US government provided \$5 million in assistance, including funds to establish a US-Albania Transparency Academy, aimed at ensuring accountability in post-disaster recovery efforts (Razak et al., 2019).

Turkey's response was framed within its broader geopolitical strategy in the Balkans. As a long-standing political ally of Albania, Turkey deployed humanitarian teams through TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), which distributed food, medical supplies, and temporary shelters. This response aligned with Turkey's foreign policy approach, where humanitarian aid is used as a tool for soft power expansion in the region (Bilgin et al., 2020). Scholars argue that Turkey's humanitarian engagement through TIKA is part of a larger strategy to increase its influence in the Western Balkans, positioning itself as a regional power (Kočan and Arbeiter, 2019). Despite long-standing political tensions, Greece and Albania demonstrated cooperative diplomacy in the wake of the earthquake. The Greek government was among the first to send search-and-rescue teams, along with emergency aid supplies. This gesture echoed the "earthquake diplomacy" of 1999, when Greece and Turkey experienced reciprocal humanitarian responses following devastating earthquakes (Freddi et al., 2021). Greece's involvement in Albania's recovery reflects its broader diplomatic objectives in the Western Balkans, particularly its interest in maintaining stability and fostering economic cooperation (Panagiotou and Tzifakis, 2022).

Similarly, Serbia, a country with historically complex relations with Albania due to the Kosovo conflict, sent specialized disaster response teams and €2 million in financial aid. This marked a notable shift in bilateral engagement, as it was one of the largest financial contributions Serbia had ever provided to Albania. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić later remarked that relations between Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia were at their best in decades, signaling a potential shift towards regional integration (Razak et al., 2019). Beyond its humanitarian dimension, disaster relief often functions as a strategic foreign policy tool. Countries providing assistance frequently seek to leverage humanitarian aid for long-term diplomatic or economic advantages (Freddi et al., 2021). International aid often serves both humanitarian and strategic objectives, with donor states using crisis response as a means to reinforce diplomatic ties or expand influence in recipient countries (Barakat, 2014). In the case of the 2019 Albania earthquake, aid distribution patterns highlighted pre-existing geopolitical alignments. While EU and US assistance reinforced Albania's Euro-Atlantic trajectory, the responses from Turkey, Serbia, and Greece reflected regional power dynamics and historical relationships (Bilgin et al., 2020).

A more detailed examination of the main actors involved further clarifies how humanitarian assistance reflected their broader diplomatic expectations toward Albania. The European Union approached the crisis through the lens of Albania's EU accession pathway, using its coordinated assistance to reinforce conditionality, promote institutional reforms, and demonstrate the benefits of alignment with EU civil protection mechanisms. The United States framed its support as part of a long-standing partnership, linking post-earthquake assistance to initiatives on transparency, governance, and anti-corruption through the U.S.–Albania Transparency Academy. Greece's response was shaped by its objective of maintaining regional stability and improving bilateral relations despite historical sensitivities; rapid deployment of Hellenic rescue teams functioned as a confidence-building gesture. Turkey, by contrast, integrated its humanitarian intervention into its strategic ambition to expand influence in the Western Balkans, leveraging TIKA's operations to project soft power in a country with which it maintains cultural and political proximity. Serbia's assistance—one of its largest bilateral contributions to Albania—reflected its effort to reshape its regional image and support the “Open Balkan” political initiative, signaling a pragmatic shift toward cooperation despite traditional tensions. These differentiated expectations underline how each actor used the humanitarian response not only to provide relief

but also to advance its medium- and long-term diplomatic objectives vis-à-vis Albania.

Moreover, the earthquake response revealed the importance of institutional preparedness in disaster governance. The EU's coordinated intervention illustrated the effectiveness of multilateral mechanisms, whereas bilateral aid efforts, although symbolically significant, sometimes lacked the same level of logistical efficiency (The Brussels Times, 2019). Finally, the Albanian earthquake underscored a broader pattern in international relations: in times of crisis, states often set aside political rivalries in favor of humanitarian cooperation. However, whether these moments of solidarity translate into long-term diplomatic improvements remains a complex question (Kelman, 2016).

In conclusion, the 2019 Albania earthquake was not only a natural disaster but also a test case for disaster diplomacy. The responses from regional and global actors demonstrated that humanitarian aid could serve as a catalyst for diplomatic engagement, albeit with varying degrees of strategic intent. As Albania continues its post-disaster recovery, the event serves as a reminder that disaster response is deeply intertwined with foreign policy, and that crises can reshape international relationships in both the short and long term (Freddi et al., 2021).

3. Disaster Diplomacy and Foreign Policy: Strategic Considerations in Humanitarian Action

The intersection of foreign policy and humanitarian action has long been a subject of international debate. While humanitarian aid is framed as an altruistic endeavor, its deployment is often influenced by national interests, security concerns, and geopolitical strategy (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Metcalfe-Hough, and Willitts-King, 2016). States routinely integrate disaster relief into their broader diplomatic and strategic objectives, using aid as a soft power instrument to enhance their global standing, strengthen alliances, and expand economic influence (Boschini and Olofsgard, 2007). This duality—balancing humanitarian imperatives with strategic foreign policy interests—underscores the complexity of disaster diplomacy.

Disaster diplomacy differs significantly from other forms of non-crisis diplomacy, both in its dynamics and in its effects. While traditional diplomacy is based on long-term strategies and negotiations, disaster diplomacy is shaped by the urgency of responding to natural or man-made crises, requiring rapid action and flexibility. State and non-state actors involved in it are called upon to balance humanitarian needs and geopolitical interests in an environment of high uncertainty.

One of the key features of disaster diplomacy is the ability to create direct bridges of cooperation, even between states with historical tensions. In many cases, sending humanitarian aid and providing support to affected areas allows for the development of new channels of communication and the improvement of bilateral relations. Unlike conventional forms of diplomacy, where negotiations may take years, the interaction resulting from a disaster is immediate and practical. However, the short-term nature of this cooperation often limits the potential for long-term strategic benefits. Moreover, disaster diplomacy faces unique challenges as political considerations can override humanitarian needs. Selectively sending aid or using it as a tool of influence can undermine the credibility of the states providing it, especially when humanitarian action is perceived as a means of advancing national interests (Kelman, 2012). At the same time, the lack of institutional mechanisms to manage such forms of diplomacy makes it difficult to maintain cooperation after the crisis has passed.

Although disaster diplomacy can create opportunities for cooperation, it is often not a factor in the lasting improvement of international relations. The absence of coherent strategies and the temporary nature of responses limit its long-term impact (Quarantelli, 1997). However, in cases where there is an intention to extend cooperation beyond the crisis, it can be a catalyst for broader geopolitical shifts. Its success therefore depends on the ability of states to capitalize on this dynamic and turn it into a stable mechanism for international cooperation. Humanitarian interventions following natural disasters have the potential to bring about long-term changes in diplomacy, both at the transnational and institutional levels. While humanitarian assistance is often provided as a short-term response to crisis situations, its impact on the international political arena can last for decades, leading to transformations in international relations, crisis management and the institutionalization of new mechanisms of cooperation (Kelman, 2016). One of the main long-term impacts is the strengthening of humanitarian diplomacy as a central element of many states' foreign policy. States that take initiatives in natural disaster situations often create new diplomatic identities, shaping their image on the international stage as credible and responsible actors. This has led to the institutionalisation of specialised humanitarian units within foreign ministries or to adjustments of international development strategies to make a stronger link between humanitarian aid and political influence (Whittall, 2015).

Another critical long-term transformation concerns the internationalisation of natural disaster management. During the 21st century, the need for rapid response to disasters has led to the strengthening of multilateral aid mechanisms such as the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the International Federation of Red Cross. These institutions now function not only as crisis management tools, but also as stable channels of

diplomatic communication between states that may not have strong diplomatic relations in other areas (Barnett and Walker, 2015; Pease, 2016; Pusterla, 2016)

Moreover, humanitarian response has led to changes in strategic relationships between states, with some countries using aid as a tool to enhance their political influence. Some major powers have used humanitarian missions to improve their bilateral relations or to strengthen geopolitical strategies. This is particularly evident in cases where humanitarian aid is followed by long-term development programmes, strengthening economic and political relationships between donors and beneficiaries. Another important long-term change involves a shift in the rules and principles governing humanitarian action. The growing link between humanitarian aid and development cooperation has led to adjustments in the way states and international organizations perceive their responsibility towards crisis situations. The 2016 World Humanitarian Conference highlighted the importance of building sustainable resilience mechanisms, reducing reliance on traditional, short-term aid and promoting more institutionalised forms of international cooperation (Duffield, 2019). Finally, the long-term impact of humanitarian interventions is also reflected in institutional changes in international organisations. The growing need for effective crisis management has led to reforms within the UN, NATO and other regional organisations to improve coordination and response to emergencies. This has shaped a new form of preventive diplomacy, where states recognise the value of proactive action in natural disaster management as a means of strengthening their international position (Bettini, 2021).

Overall, humanitarian actions related to natural disasters are not limited to short-term interventions, but have a significant and lasting impact on diplomacy, influencing foreign policy formulation, international relations, institutional developments and strategic cooperation between states. Humanitarian diplomacy has evolved into a critical field that is reshaping not only crisis management but also the very content of international politics. The perception of countries receiving humanitarian aid after a disaster about the geopolitical motivations of donors can have important implications for bilateral relations in the future. Aid is not always perceived as a selfless act of solidarity but is often interpreted in the light of the strategic interests of the donor state.

In some cases, aid can help to improve diplomatic relations by creating opportunities for greater cooperation at political, economic or military level. For example, a country receiving generous and direct support may develop a more positive attitude towards the donor state, which facilitates future cooperation and negotiations. Conversely, if aid comes with conditions or if it is perceived as an instrument of political influence, it may provoke reservations or even opposition from the government or public opinion in the recipient state.

The reaction of recipient countries depends on several factors, such as the history of bilateral relations, the transparency of the humanitarian intervention and the domestic political situation. In states with a strong sense of national sovereignty, foreign aid can be seen as a threat or as an attempt at dependency. Conversely, in countries seeking closer international alliances, the acceptance of aid can be used to strengthen their strategic position. The long-term impact of this perception on bilateral relations depends on whether aid translates into sustained cooperation. If accompanied by further diplomatic initiatives, economic agreements or institutional support, it can help to stabilise and strengthen relations. But if assistance is seen as manipulation or as a means of political pressure, it can lead to mistrust and disengagement, negatively affecting future diplomatic contacts. To avoid negative effects, it is crucial that donors demonstrate transparency, avoid coercive practices and take into account the cultural and political sensitivities of the recipient country. A more participatory approach, where the recipient state has an active role in aid management, can reduce suspicion and enhance the perception of mutual cooperation.

The 2019 Albania earthquake exemplified how natural disasters can serve as catalysts for diplomatic engagement. Greece, a country with a historically contentious relationship with Albania, provided immediate humanitarian assistance, reinforcing bilateral relations while showcasing its regional leadership in disaster response (Meernik et al., 1998). This raises an essential question: Was Greece's response purely humanitarian, or did it serve broader strategic objectives? Disaster diplomacy often aligns with pre-existing geopolitical strategies, where states leverage crisis response mechanisms to assert leadership and influence within regional alliances (Kelman, 2016). In the context of Greece and Albania, the provision of post-earthquake assistance was multifaceted. On one hand, Greece's response aligned with regional stability objectives, reinforcing diplomatic ties with its Balkan neighbor. On the other, humanitarian assistance served as a diplomatic gesture, positioning Greece as a reliable regional partner and strengthening its influence within the Western Balkans' EU integration framework. The significance of this response was further magnified by the presence of other regional actors, particularly Turkey, which has historically used humanitarian assistance as a soft power tool to expand its influence in the Balkans (Bryce, 2014). Turkey's response to the Albania earthquake mirrored its broader strategy of utilizing humanitarian aid to build geopolitical alliances, a tactic also observed in its outreach to African and Middle Eastern nations (Binder and Erten, 2013).

Humanitarian assistance is inevitably linked to foreign policy considerations, and donor states may pursue strategic, security, or economic objectives through disaster relief.

These motivations—whether linked to regional stability, diplomatic influence, or economic interdependence—shape the ways states engage with affected countries, including in the Albanian case.

A key debate in disaster diplomacy is whether humanitarian crises genuinely foster long-term diplomatic transformations or merely serve as temporary catalysts for engagement (Kelman, 2012). The Greece-Albania case study illustrates that while disaster relief can improve short-term bilateral cooperation, it does not necessarily resolve deeper geopolitical tensions. The historical trajectory of disaster diplomacy suggests that while crises can create diplomatic openings, long-term relationship-building requires sustained policy engagement beyond immediate aid responses (Caron et al., 2014).

The SWOT framework (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) provides insight into the dynamics of disaster diplomacy:

- **Strengths:** Disaster response enhances state legitimacy, builds international credibility, and promotes regional leadership.
- **Weaknesses:** Aid efforts can be perceived as self-serving, leading to distrust or dependency among recipient states.
- **Opportunities:** Crises create openings for dialogue, reconciliation, and long-term partnerships.
- **Threats:** If aid is perceived as politically motivated, it can exacerbate tensions rather than foster cooperation (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016).

In the case of Greece and Albania, the earthquake response strengthened short-term diplomatic goodwill, but historical tensions—including territorial disputes and political mistrust—continue to shape bilateral relations. This suggests that while disaster diplomacy can be an effective tool, its success depends on pre-existing political conditions and long-term diplomatic commitment.

Overall, disaster diplomacy operates at the intersection of humanitarian ethics and political strategy. While humanitarian assistance serves an essential role in crisis response, it is also a powerful instrument of foreign policy. The case of Greece and Albania demonstrates that natural disasters can serve as opportunities for diplomatic engagement, but they rarely lead to lasting geopolitical realignment on their own. Ultimately, the effectiveness of disaster diplomacy depends on political will, strategic alignment, and long-term commitment. While humanitarian aid can foster cooperation in times of crisis, sustaining diplomatic gains requires a broader framework of political engagement and mutual trust (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016).

4. Discussion on Natural Disasters and Diplomacy: Policy Lessons, Institutional Challenges, and Future Directions

The role of disaster diplomacy in shaping international relations has increasingly drawn attention from policymakers, scholars, and humanitarian actors. While humanitarian aid is often framed as an apolitical necessity, the reality is more complex, as states strategically engage in disaster response to promote foreign policy objectives, strengthen alliances, and assert geopolitical influence (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016). The diplomatic implications of humanitarian assistance are particularly evident in regions where natural disasters intersect with political tensions, creating both opportunities and challenges for international cooperation. However, despite the growing relevance of disaster diplomacy, significant knowledge gaps persist regarding its long-term effects on bilateral and multilateral relations. Addressing these gaps is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions, refining diplomatic strategies, and ensuring that disaster diplomacy fosters sustainable international cooperation rather than short-lived political gestures.

Current research on disaster diplomacy remains limited in scope, often focusing on specific case studies without fully exploring the broader geopolitical patterns that shape humanitarian engagement. Much of the existing literature examines geographically or politically aligned groups of states, overlooking how individual countries may adopt distinct foreign policy approaches to disaster response. Moreover, a considerable portion of the research is centered on donor states and their financial contributions to humanitarian crises, with less attention paid to the political strategies employed by recipient states (Hannigan, 2013). The lack of publicly available data on humanitarian assistance, aid disbursement, and diplomatic negotiations further complicates efforts to establish clear patterns of behavior. Additionally, while studies frequently analyze the immediate diplomatic outcomes of disaster responses, they often fail to assess whether these engagements result in long-term diplomatic transformations or remain temporary alignments based on crisis management (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016).

One of the key challenges in disaster diplomacy is the absence of a universal framework that integrates humanitarian assistance into foreign policy planning. While states may engage in disaster relief efforts for various reasons, ranging from genuine humanitarian concerns to strategic diplomatic objectives, there is no consistent mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions in achieving lasting political engagement (Pauwelyn et al., 2012). This gap underscores the need for a more structured approach to disaster diplomacy that incorporates both theoretical and empirical insights. The complex web of interactions between humanitarian actors,

donor states, and recipient governments makes it difficult to establish direct causality between disaster relief efforts and diplomatic shifts. Any linear analysis of disaster diplomacy is likely to be flawed, as crises unfold in unpredictable ways, and their diplomatic consequences depend on multiple factors, including pre-existing relations, political leadership, and international support mechanisms (Kelman, 2016).

The case of Greece and Albania following the 2019 earthquake highlights both the potential and the limitations of disaster diplomacy. Greece was among the first countries to send humanitarian aid, dispatching search-and-rescue teams, medical supplies, and financial assistance. This response built upon historical precedents, such as Greek-Turkish earthquake diplomacy in 1999, demonstrating that humanitarian aid can act as a catalyst for improving bilateral relations (Panagiotou and Tzifakis, 2022). However, while Greek aid efforts were widely welcomed in Albania, the broader political context remains complex. Pre-existing disputes over minority rights, territorial issues, and EU integration policies continue to influence Greek-Albanian relations, raising questions about whether disaster diplomacy alone can serve as a foundation for long-term diplomatic stability, under the view that this stability refers to the maintenance of stable and predictable international relations over time, regardless of short-term crises or changes in political leadership. It is a fundamental objective of international politics, as it contributes to reducing conflict, facilitating cooperation between states and maintaining peace and security. At this exact point, it should be noted with emphasis that this stability may be threatened by factors such as the rise of revisionist forces, economic crises or technological changes affecting international balances. For this reason, states seeking long-term diplomatic stability invest in crisis management mechanisms and the development of diplomatic relations based on mutual interests rather than opportunistic transactions. While Greece's response was effective in demonstrating solidarity, sustaining improved diplomatic relations requires continuous engagement beyond the scope of humanitarian assistance (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016).

Institutional coordination presents another major challenge in disaster diplomacy. Humanitarian response efforts are typically fragmented across multiple agencies, including governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This fragmentation often leads to inefficiencies, duplications, and gaps in aid delivery (Cubie, 2011). Inconsistencies between national disaster response policies and international coordination mechanisms further complicate the effective implementation of disaster relief initiatives. The European Union's Civil Protection Mechanism provides an example of a structured regional approach to disaster response, enabling EU member states to collaborate in providing humanitarian

assistance (European Commission, 2025). However, outside structured frameworks like the EU, states often lack clear guidelines for integrating disaster relief into their broader diplomatic strategies.

The role of non-state actors in disaster diplomacy is also an area requiring further exploration. While state-led humanitarian interventions dominate international disaster response efforts, NGOs, multinational corporations, and philanthropic organizations play an increasingly significant role in shaping humanitarian engagement. Private sector involvement in disaster relief has expanded in recent years, with businesses contributing financial aid, logistical support, and technological solutions (Johal and Mounsey, 2016). However, the implications of corporate engagement in humanitarian action remain unclear. Unlike states, which may use disaster relief to advance foreign policy objectives, private entities often operate under different incentives, including brand reputation, corporate social responsibility commitments, and market expansion opportunities (Kelman, 2016). Understanding how non-state actors interact with state-led humanitarian efforts is crucial for assessing the full spectrum of disaster diplomacy.

While disaster diplomacy can create openings for cooperation, its success depends on sustained engagement beyond the immediate crisis. Humanitarian aid may generate short-term goodwill, but its long-term diplomatic value is influenced by political conditions, institutional coordination, and the degree to which assistance remains transparent and non-politicized. Looking ahead, future research on disaster diplomacy should focus on several key areas. First, there is a need for longitudinal studies that track diplomatic relationships over extended periods following disaster interventions. Analyzing how humanitarian aid influences diplomatic ties beyond the immediate aftermath of a crisis would provide valuable insights into the sustainability of disaster diplomacy efforts. Second, research should explore variations in disaster diplomacy approaches across different geopolitical contexts. While some states may actively use humanitarian aid as a foreign policy tool, others may adopt more passive or reactive approaches. Identifying these variations can help refine theories of disaster diplomacy and inform policymaking (Kelman, 2012).

From a practical policy perspective, decision-makers should prioritize the integration of disaster diplomacy into broader foreign policy frameworks. Governments should establish clear guidelines for linking humanitarian assistance with diplomatic objectives while ensuring that aid efforts remain ethical and effective. Strengthening institutional coordination at both the national and international levels is also critical for improving the efficiency of disaster response operations (Sommario, 2019). Investing in research,

data collection, and policy development related to disaster diplomacy can help bridge existing knowledge gaps and enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian engagement.

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