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**EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON NATO'S HUMANITARIAN  
DIPLOMACY**

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**Abstract:**

NATO has a growing humanitarian role at the international area especially since the beginning of 2000s. Albeit being a military alliance, NATO's values and strategic interests, as well as its capabilities and tools for disaster response have been transformed over time. Owing to providing disaster-aid and humanitarian-relief in an efficient and timely manner, its humanitarian diplomacy has become a successful case study for relief organizations. Accordingly, this article aims to examine and reveal NATO's humanitarian diplomacy based on its major relief operations. It is concluded that This study concludes that it is necessary to institutionalize a multi-dimensional diplomacy approach based on cultural sensitivity and to develop strategic foresight capabilities in the era of polycrisis.

*Key words: Disaster Management; Humanitarian Aid; Humanitarian Diplomacy; NATO.*

## **1.Introduction**

In modern world, which is negatively affected by polycrisis as a result of protracted crises, responding to these complex emergencies and providing access to humanitarian aid has become one of the priority issues on the global security agenda. Protracted crises, defined as situations in which a significant portion of the population faces a high risk of death, illness, and livelihood disruption for more than five years. These types of risks pose an increasing challenge to governments and international organizations, as well as humanitarian and development actors. Political unrest has escalated into protracted crises in many countries, leaving them characterized by fragility, conflict, and violence.

The spillover effects of these crises in surrounding countries have led to an influx of refugees, particularly into urban areas. According to the United Nations, 22 states and more than 160 million people are facing protracted crises that pose a significant security risk for both national and international security [1]. Therefore, NATO's both disaster-aid and humanitarian-relief capabilities have significantly improved during major disasters. Accordingly, this study aims to examine and reveal NATO's humanitarian diplomacy based on its major relief operations in recent years.

## **2.The New World Order: An Era of Polycrisis**

The 21st century is characterized by a global reality shaped by climate change, pandemics, mass migration, disinformation, economic fluctuations, and regional conflicts. These issues reveal the complex nature of crises, which interact with each other, feed on common triggers, and produce multilayered outcomes. This situation, conceptualized in literature as polycrisis, refers to a



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phenomenon in which multiple types of crises occur simultaneously, and these crises, in turn, trigger each other, compounding the complexities of the situation [2]. Therefore, polycrisis is considered as threats that include asymmetric and hybrid security risks and whose scope is constantly expanding.

This period, which marks an era of polycrisis, requires states to reexamine their foreign policy tools and diplomatic strategies. The inadequacy of traditional diplomacy, military deterrence, and hard power practices, including economic sanctions, in managing comprehensive and high-impact threats, further enhances the importance of soft power elements [3]. The systemic vulnerabilities inherent in multiple crises increase the complexity of the global order and lead to the interconnected progression of crises. In recent years, threats have gained global dimensions and amplified through a domino effect. Economic fluctuations, environmental destruction, social inequality, and technological transformation, while seemingly independent, are variables that form an intertwined network of interactions. The health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered multiple crises, along with economic contractions, supply chain disruptions, psychological problems, and educational disruptions [4]. Consequently, social protests have become widespread and political instability has emerged.

### **3. Humanitarian (Aid) Diplomacy amidst Polycrisis**

Historically, humanitarian aid has been conducted under extremely insecure and unstable political conditions to provide access, assistance, and protection for civilians. Humanitarian aid diplomacy or humanitarian diplomacy emerged as a concept in the early 2000s. It persuades decision-makers and leaders to always act in the best interests of vulnerable people and under all circumstances, with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles [5].

Humanitarian diplomacy is defined as the set of activities undertaken by various actors—governments, (para)military organizations, or individuals—to intervene or insist on intervention in a context where humanity is at risk [6]. Improving access to humanitarian assistance in conflict and complex emergencies has always been a priority for policymakers and humanitarian actors. The traditional scope of humanitarian diplomacy extends from maintaining the presence of humanitarian organizations to reaching civilian populations in need. It includes monitoring aid programs, promoting respect for international law, and advocating in support of broader humanitarian goals [7]. There are a growing political consensus and commitment to "leaving no one behind" in the 2030 Agenda, and humanitarian diplomacy is seen as a tool for reaching the most vulnerable.

On the other hand, disaster diplomacy focuses on why and how disaster-related activities affect conflict and peace processes, particularly in terms of disaster risk and disaster response outcomes, and whether a causal chain can be established [8,9]. The scope and framework of humanitarian diplomacy is more limited than disaster diplomacy. The key difference between disaster diplomacy and humanitarian diplomacy is the involvement of local actors in the process and their reconciliation when necessary.

In order to emphasize effective data management strategies in the operational arena and minimize potential losses in the event of large-scale emergencies and disasters, various international response organizations have been established, enabling more efficient response processes. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), established in 1991 under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), is a substantial example of the effectiveness of international cooperation in both humanitarian coordination and response processes [10].



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#### **4. NATO's Increasing Role in Humanitarian Diplomacy**

Albeit being a military alliance, NATO's involvement in humanitarian operations dates to 1953. A disaster assistance framework based on the capabilities for protecting civilians in times of conflicts, as well as protecting them during natural or man-made disasters was developed [7]. In the same year, NATO carried out humanitarian operations during storm floods in Belgium and Netherlands. The procedures for disaster coordination were established by 1958. In 1976, NATO dispatched relief teams for the earthquake in Italy.

It is noteworthy to mention that after the 2000s, NATO responded to three major disasters with the collective use of military capabilities: Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Kashmir Earthquake in 2005, and monsoon floods in Pakistan in 2010. Especially Kashmir Earthquake becomes exemplary case study since the response process is based on a two-stage Alliance response: air-bridge (during which almost 3,500 tons of relief supplies were carried out with 168 NATO flights), and the deployment of Response Force. For the first time, NATO's relief flights noted down as the largest and single contribution in terms of the airlift relief effort [11].

NATO's increasing role in humanitarian relief operations has become visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic, member nations built 100 field hospitals with more than 25,000 treatment beds while more than 350 flights were transporting medical personnel. Almost 1,500 metric tones of equipment and medical supplies were dispatched to members including Romania, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Bulgaria [12].

In accordance with the changing security environment, NATO's capabilities have transformed as well. Science for Peace and Security program was developed in 2006 to address emerging security challenges such as environmental security, energy security, and water management. Due to rapidly changing climate and climate associated security risks, NATO adopted Climate Change and Security Action Plan to fight against climate crisis associated migration and the humanitarian consequences [13]. In addition, NATO Centre of Excellence for Climate Change and Security was established in 2023 and accredited in 2024.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The crises of modern times are being evaluated within a network of multiple interconnected crises shaped by systemic vulnerabilities, fundamentally transforming the functioning of global governance mechanisms. In the face of these crises, which cannot be managed through technical or military means, diplomacy practices shaped by cultural narratives, historical memory, and established norms have become essential.

Military intervention in disasters is a common occurrence worldwide, particularly when local and civilian capacity is exceeded. In the acute phase of a disaster, interventions can range from search and rescue and debris removal to route clearing, establishing field hospitals, water treatment and supply, and ensuring the safety of response teams. For instance, as part of Operation Hestia, the Canadian Army deployed a team of more than 2,000 army, navy, and air force personnel to respond to the earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010. This team performed a variety of tasks, including search and rescue, delivering large quantities of emergency medical supplies, food, water, tents, tarpaulins, water treatment units, and the establishment of field hospitals [14].

On the other hand, increasing the military's response to disasters is not as simple as it seems. As noted by some scholars [15], increased military involvement can be perceived by civilians as a threat to civil liberties. Furthermore, international intervention can lead to various problems related to cultural differences [16].



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Herein, NATO's transformation of capabilities presents a unique example for humanitarian aid. Albeit its being a military alliance, NATO's capabilities transformed and expanded over time to address emerging security challenges such as sea level rise, extreme weather conditions, protracted crises, depletion of natural resources, flood risks, geological hazards and pollution, as well as climate-related migration.

The Alliance seems determined to actively engage in coordinating civil emergency response and coordinating civil preparedness. While the establishment of Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre accelerates the allied efforts, this study concludes that in the era of polycrisis, it is necessary to institutionalize a multi-dimensional diplomacy approach based on cultural sensitivity and to develop strategic foresight capabilities. In this context, NATO's humanitarian diplomacy capabilities need to be strengthened especially based on crisis prevention and management.

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