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**The tsunami has revealed another face of globalisation**

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Transnational terrorism; transnational crime; now transnational disaster. The tsunami that ravaged the shores of the Indian Ocean on Boxing Day is a new sort of natural catastrophe, a catastrophe of the age of globalisation.

Countries from Thailand to Africa were affected directly and people from almost 40 other nations are among the dead and missing.

The waves took rich and poor alike: Scandinavian tourists and Sri Lankan fishermen, Australian children and Indonesian farmers. Like the terrorist attacks on the United States and in Bali, the tsunami reminded us of the fragile interconnectedness of our lives.

Today in Jakarta, Prime Minister John Howard joins other political leaders at a summit meeting to review the response to the crisis. The way the international community is grappling with the relief effort echoes other larger debates about international organisation in the post-9/11 world.

One approach, taken by India, for example, has been to emphasise global multilateral approaches, to look to the United Nations as the only organisation with the legitimacy to represent the international community and best placed to co-ordinate emergency relief.

Another approach, evident in the sudden US announcement of a quadripartite grouping of the United States, Japan, Australia and India to co-ordinate aid, emphasised the role of the powerful and the rich in maintaining world order. As anything other than a practical back channel of communication it was an ill-conceived idea, and happily seems to have faded from the public view.

The initial US response to the disaster was cloth-eared and inadequate, but, as so often, that nation's generosity reasserted itself and America's matchless capacity to deploy resources reminded the globalised world of how much it continues to rely on US power.

Multilateral organisations and great powers will play their part in the response to the crisis but, as so often recently (think of East Timor and Solomon Islands), the most useful responses we have seen have been the result of a sort of ad hoc regionalism – a coalition of the affected and the effective.

Today's summit, for example, was initiated by the new Indonesian government. It is an important sign that Indonesia is again taking a regional leadership role.

Jakarta's sensible decision to involve non-government organisations in the co-ordination of aid delivery is another indication of the way the system has been opened up.

The economic impact of the tsunami on South-East Asia's poor will be more limited than the financial crisis of 1997-98, but the political and social impact will be substantial.

The devastation was greatest in Indonesia's Aceh province and in north-eastern Sri Lanka, two areas already torn by civil conflict.

In each case, the crisis may provide a circuit breaker, an opportunity to redefine the terms of the dispute. Speedy and incorrupt relief and rebuilding operations alone will not be enough to secure this, but they are essential beginnings. In Aceh, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has good credentials. He knows the region and has grappled with its problems in the past.

Other longer-term international trends are also evident in the responses to the crisis. China, for example, has again set out to show itself as a helpful regional partner with sophisticated capacities to help.

Japan, alert to China's regional leadership ambitions, has donated more to the relief effort than any other country.

The disaster will shape Australian foreign policy as well. The government's response has been quick and sensitive. As we saw after the Bali bombings, the Australian public service responded very well to the consular crisis and to the broader humanitarian challenges.

"We were on the phone and doing things while others slumbered," one public servant said.

And the police and military have yet again shown how important they have become to Australia's promotion of its overseas interests.

Australia's refocusing on the region, evident since Howard's re-election, has developed another dimension.

Today's meeting in Jakarta looks very like the membership of the Asian Summit of which Australia wants to be part, and Australia's actions since Boxing Day have illustrated again what a valuable contribution it makes to regional outcomes.

The way we see this crisis through will help define our relations with our neighbours for a long time to come.