

[SE4-OR-1] Japan's Nuclear Disaster and the U.S.- Japan Alliance

Yuma Kuwata
Keio University

Full Summary

Dr. Patrick Cronin, Senior Advisor and Senior Director of Asia Program in Center for a New American Security did the opening remark for “Japan’s Nuclear Disaster and the US Japan Alliance” discussion panel. He first showed his condolences to the victims of March 11th and hoped everything would go back to normal for them as soon as possible. He stated, Magnitude 9 earthquake that struck Japan on March 11th and the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant Disaster that followed was the worst disaster to ever hit Japan since World War Two. This disaster makes us rethink wide range of policy issues; such as government’s nuclear safety regulations, energy security concerns, reprocessing and fuel storage policy, and US-Japan alliance. There should be no limit to the area which we would have to rethink. This discussion should be open to wide range of topic since effect of this disaster knows no boundary.

Dr. Cronin asked each participant, in their view, how 3/11 disaster will change the U.S. Japan alliance. Each panelist answered from the view of their field. Dr. Noboru Yamaguchi, professor of National Defense Academy of Japan, pointed out that “Operation Tomodachi” and joint mission done by USF and JSDF right after 3/11 disaster has greatly emphasized the effectiveness and the potential of US-Japan alliance. Dr. Tetsuo Kotani from the Okazaki institute explained the positive and negative implications of 3/11 disaster and “Operation Tomodachi”. Dr. Zachary Hosford from Center for New American Security pointed out that no fundamental change occurred between US and Japan after 3/11 because the regional politics did not change after 3/11, but it showed both US and Japan how they can increase the range cooperation. Dr. Chaim Braun, professor of Stanford University, pointed out several technical lessons that Japan has learned from 3/11, and he presented his policy idea for spent fuel storage issue.

Dr. Noboru Yamaguchi, professor of military history and strategy at the National Defense Academy of Japan, was in the crisis management team for 3/11 disaster that was set up by the Prime Minister. Therefore he was the first people to see the interaction of US and Japanese

government in time of crisis. Dr. Yamaguchi pointed out three characteristics of the joint operations between United States Military (USM) and Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF): quick deployment, USM's great awareness to Japanese culture, and great coordination between USM and JSDF.

Dr. Yamaguchi pointed out that the quick deployment of USM to the disaster area were able to show the Japanese government the importance of logistic bases. JSDF were deployed within 3 days of the disaster and 80,000 troops were added later on; they were deployed from 10 ground bases around the disaster zone and these bases were used as the logistic bases for the relief operation. USM on the other hand, were deployed from USS Ronald Reagan and USM were able to create new logistic base by clearing out the debris in the Sendai airport and making the airport its new logistic base. Compared to JSDF, USM's deployment is far more flexible and creative. Dr. Yamaguchi implied that JSDF have lot to learn from USM's deployment methods and we may be able to implement it on Senkaku island conflict.

USM's deployment to disaster zone also showed USM's high cultural awareness in the deployed region. For example, when the USM were communicating with the local residence, rather than shaking hand, they bowed and respected the Japanese culture. This action not only amazed the local people but also earned the trust from the local people and many Japanese citizens.

The joint operation of USM and JSDF also emphasized the great coordination of USM and JSDF in both vertical and horizontal aspect. Dr. Yamamoto explained that this great coordination between USM and JSDF is the result of from decades of joint training and continuous communication between the top military officials. For example, even though the Chinese Navy offered to help JSDF with search and rescue mission of people who were taken by the tsunami, the Japanese government refused because they knew that only USM and JSDF were capable of communicate and coordinate their movement to evade the debris that was floating in the Sanriku coast.

Dr. Tetsuo Kotani from Okazaki institute focused on explaining the positive implication and the negative implication of "Operation Tomodachi". "Operation Tomodachi" is a USM assistance operation to support Japan in disaster relief following the 3/11 disaster. 20 US naval ships, 140 aircrafts, and 19,703 sailors and marines were involved in disaster relief efforts in Japan. Dr. Kotani was first amazed with the quick deployment of USM toward the disaster area—most notably the deployment of USS Ronald Reagan.

Dr. Kotani stated, the positive implication of "Operation Tomodachi" is that it showed significant effectiveness of the alliance. He pointed out that massive deployment of USM like

USS Ronald Reagan showed US's great commitment to the incident, and the great coordination seen from the operation gives us hope of what else we can use this alliance for. The negative implication, Dr. Kotani stated, would be the Fukushima Nuclear Crisis's negative impact on the reputation of nuclear powered vessels. Japanese citizens already had strong allergy toward nuclear weapon, but this accident made them not only fear the nuclear weapon but also fear the nuclear fission technology itself. For example, citizens living near Yokosuka, the homeport of nuclear powered carrier USS George Washington, started expressing worries about nuclear powered vessel entering their harbor. Nuclear powered ship like USS Ronald Reagan played a key role in "Operation Tomodachi" but most importantly nuclear powered vessels are the key element in sustaining regional security balance. Dr. Kotani suggested that Japanese government must try its best to scrub off this negative image not only for its energy security issue but for its security issues.

Mr. Zachary Hosford, research Associate at the Center for New American Security, pointed out the short term and long term effect of the 3/11 disaster and presented some of his own policy ideas.

The short term effect would of course be the power shortage. Mr. Hosford pointed out that Japan will be forced to secure larger quantity of fossil fuel to make up for the shortage of energy supply that is expected to come due to the shutdown of nuclear power plants. This will temporarily push Japan to rely on fossil fuel and make itself vulnerable to the price influx of fossil fuel.

The long term effect would be the strengthening of US-Japan alliance. US-Japan alliance did not fundamentally change after 3/11 disaster since the regional power balance never changed, but cooperation of USM and JSDF showed new possibility of collaboration and joint missions. Mr. Hosford also suggested strengthening US-Japan alliance in the field of energy security such as jointly creating stronger and safer safety regulation codes for nuclear power plants to regain the trust from the citizens.

Dr. Chaim Braun, consulting professor from Center for International Security And Cooperation (CISAC) specializing in issues related to nuclear power economics and fuel supply and nuclear nonproliferation, pointed out multiple technical lessons that Japan has learned from Fukushima nuclear disaster. Some of the lessons were avoiding construction of multiple reactors in a single power plant site, ensuring strong emergency power system, and avoiding massive storage of spent fuel near the power plant. Dr. Braun also presented his own policy ideas to tackle these issues.

Dr. Braun pointed out that one of the reasons the damages of nuclear accident extended was the high concentration of multiple nuclear reactors in one area. Concentrating several nuclear reactors in one area would be a major risk when natural disaster such as tsunami sweeps the entire area. To avoid those risks, Japan would have to disperse its nuclear reactor rather than concentrating them in one area, but this would be difficult due to strong local opposition of creating nuclear power plant in their backyard.

Another factor that lead to the nuclear facility's disaster was the insufficient emergency power system to the nuclear facility. The loss of power stopped the cooling system of the nuclear reactor thus causing a meltdown. Dr. Braun suggested that every nuclear facility should install large power generator and a large battery. The initial investment would be substantial, but it is necessary to protect the capital return.

Storage of spent nuclear fuel was another grave issue that came up in the wake of the disaster. The explosion in one of the nuclear facilities dispersed some of the spent fuel to the surrounding environment. To avoid this risk, Dr. Braun suggested on fully utilizing the Rokkasho nuclear reprocessing plant to dramatically reduce the amount of spent fuel storage. The Rokkasho plant still needs more investment for completion, but if we utilize the plant not only for Japan but for other countries that's willing to reprocess their nuclear fuel, we will be able to collect more investment and contribute to the safety of the entire region.

Other than technical issues, we would have to rethink the safety and regulation issues of nuclear energy. Dr. Braun suggested that International Atomic Energy Agency should be given the power to overlook and harmonize the safety regulation of the member nations. There will be a need to create a stronger insurance policy that would give premium to good performance and punish the bad one.

All of the alternative policies that Dr. Braun suggested may seem expensive in the short term, but he emphasized that "Good safety regulation is a Good economy," and that is the most important lesson from this nuclear disaster.

As Dr. Cronin said in the introduction of the discussion, the disasters that followed the Magnitude 9 earthquake is expected to affect wide range of policy issues; from US-Japan alliance to nuclear safety regulations. Every panelist focused on different area in which this disaster will affect Japan, but they all agreed that Japan would need to carefully analyze their mistakes and utilize the lessons learned to whatever way possible.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

* The views expressed here are panel overviews of the Asan Plenum. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the author or the institutions they are affiliated with.