

[SE4-OR-2] Japan's Nuclear Disaster and the U.S.- Japan Alliance

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Full Summary

In the wake of Japan's triple disaster, this panel session addressed the significance and impact of the events and nuclear crisis on the U.S.-Japan Alliance.

Patrick Cronin provided an introductory overview of the breadth of issues intersected by the recent nuclear crisis, ranging from issues to nuclear safety and oversight; crisis response and international cooperation, to post-Fukushima reassessment of future energy supply strategy and security; the economic and political impact of crisis management and recovery, and the immediate and longer-term implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance and security cooperation, toward the forthcoming 2+2 joint ministerial meeting and path beyond.

Noboru Yamaguchi provided high-level perspective on the post-March 11 disaster response, emphasizing the prompt, positive and supportive international response, including rapid and appreciated support from the Republic of Korea. Though the Japanese government and people appreciated all levels of international support and solidarity, it was the formidable actions, assets and attitude and actions of the U.S. military forces, which proved pivotal in the immediate aftermath of the quake and tsunami destruction. Three aspects of the 'Operation Tomodachi' coordinated military response merit emphasis. Firstly, the rapid deployment of sea and land-based forces to the disaster zone was a difficult undertaking, given the scale of destruction to land and coastline/harbors. The ability to mobilize more than one hundred thousand *Jieitai* members within 3-4 days, and get them into the remote affected areas was facilitated by the use of forward bases and logistical centers. Secondly, the importance and significant impact of U.S. military assistance, which provided crucial logistical capacity and response, initially through sea-based operations centered around the carrier *USS Ronald Reagan* and then provision of vital logistical assistance to re-open Sendai airport and regional supply points. With their on-station proximity and knowledge of coastal waters and terrain, the U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) were best positioned and able to provide practical support to the overall Japanese relief effort. The Japanese people were touched by the tremendous effort and attendant cultural awareness and sensitivity displayed by the U.S. forces. Thirdly,

‘Operation Tomodachi’ highlighted the overall effectiveness of joint Japan-U.S. coordination at all levels, with the JSDF and USFJ joint-task force performance very much proving the worth of ongoing efforts to enhance bilateral logistic planning since 1997, and the positive, practical aspects of continued close cooperation between Japan and the United States.

Tetsuo Kotani elaborated on the actions, impact and implications of ‘Operation Tomodachi’ for the U.S.-Japan alliance, highlighting the positive and some negative aspects of the March crisis and response. On a positive level, the rapid response of the United States government and USFJ special team brought succor and valuable support to the Japanese people and relief effort, visibly demonstrating alliance visibility and contribution. The experience raised positive public perception about the U.S. presence and strengthened respective government views about the utility of cooperative endeavor, which has tremendous implications for deepening alliance relations¹. It is likely that the forthcoming 2+2 discussions and joint statement will endorse further bilateral cooperation. Some negative aspects of the crisis response can also be identified, such as the initial communication issues relating to the nuclear situation at Fukushima Dai-ichi, especially during the first 4-5 days of the crisis. The U.S. decision to move the USS George Washington out of range, was initially interpreted as an evacuation, but had more to do with sensitivity to remove any possible public issue of a nuclear-powered carrier (a “mobile nuclear power plant”) in port at a time of national unease. Indeed, it is possible that the Fukushima issue might yet re-ignite Japanese opposition to nuclear power issues relating to military maritime movement (which was very much a Cold War phenomena of civil society protest against nuclear propulsion and tactical nuclear weapons conveyance associated with port calls and homeporting of U.S. Navy vessels). There is a danger that renewed anti-nuclear sentiment and activism might have a disruptive impact on U.S. naval movements (and consideration about Japan’s own SSM nuclear attack submarine), which, at a time of rising tensions in the South China Sea, could have negative implications for regional stability and crisis management.

Zachary Hosford focused on the challenges and opportunities resulting from the March crisis. Whilst the crisis was a vivid demonstration of benefits of Japan-U.S. interoperability, 3/11 did not fundamentally change the overall alliance orientation. The primary security emphases on DPRK, China and sea-lanes of communication remain, as does the need and opportunities for closer coordination to enhance regional stability. On the other hand, the events of March 11 brought to the fore new, substantial challenges for Japan’s economy and security planning. Japan’s dependence on nuclear power has been seriously challenged by the Fukushima crisis and subsequent stated government intent to revise future energy plans away from increased

¹ For example, Defense Minister Kitazawa, visiting the *USS Ronald Reagan* on 4 April 2011, commented: "I have never been more encouraged by and proud of the fact that the United States is our ally." Source: Kyodo News, ‘Japanese defense chief thanks U.S. military for humanitarian efforts’, 4 April 2011.

reliance on nuclear energy. The issue for Japan is its near total dependence on oil and gas imports, and lack of commercially viable energy sourcing alternatives, particularly ‘renewables’. With 19 of its 54 nuclear reactors currently closed, the electricity supply disruption has been deeply felt by Japanese industry and consumers. Associated energy and infrastructure replacement costs will be significant, as well as the overall economic impact of the crisis disruption and massive recovery costs, estimated to be in the range of \$200-300 billion. It remains to be seen whether these factors, of heightened energy insecurity, resource constraints and priority focus on domestic recovery, will have any significant impact on Japan’s defense posture, such as a shift away from the more externally focused NDPG orientation.

On a more positive level, there are opportunities for enhanced alliance collaboration in areas such as intelligence gathering. As regards the nuclear industry, there is scope for cooperative endeavor to address expected requirements for improvements in plant safety and security, utilizing new technology and know-how, and a pressing need for tighter regulatory control, with a fully independent regulatory agency, in order to ensure greater governance and regain public confidence in the government and energy industry.

Chaim Braun provided an overview of technical, regulatory and institutional issues associated with the Fukushima nuclear crisis, drawing tentative lessons and highlighting areas of concern and action for Japan’s nuclear future. Foremost among the emerging insights and lessons from the Fukushima crisis is the fundamental requirement for strengthening plant safety standards. Fukushima clearly demonstrated the dictum that ‘safe operations are good economics’. Though the events on March 11 did reflect exceptional circumstances, there were areas of deficiency and possible liability in safety levels and crisis response: for instance, the hesitation to use seawater to cool the reactor sites (because of economic concerns). Other key lessons for improving safety include measures to prevent station blackout (the critical issue of power loss at Fukushima, due to the low-level positioning of back-up generators) and dispersal of multiple reactors away from single, prone sites. Though the latter has technical merit, there are obviously big situational barriers in Japan, because of geography and ‘not in my back-yard (NIMBY) opposition to nuclear plants. The crisis also highlighted the issue of spent fuel management, storage and reprocessing in Japan, including the uncertain future of the Rokkasho facility in northern Japan. Already blighted by cost issues and delays, its fate is now somewhat in the balance. One option for consideration is to convert Rokkasho into a regional spent fuel storage and reprocessing center for Northeast Asia, under the joint supervision of Japan, regional partners and the IAEA. Such collaboration could combine regional needs and cost sharing, as well as addressing concerns about Japan’s plutonium future, but may not be politically acceptable to individual sovereign authorities.

Despite a fundamental case for Japanese nuclear energy, in terms of economy, diversity and security of supply, the Fukushima crisis is impacting on the global nuclear industry. In consequence it will likely increase pressure for super-safe nuclear plants (at increased cost for developers in Asia, where most of the expansion will occur). On a regulatory level, there is a need for more stringent and harmonized international safety standards between countries and across all nuclear plants. The IAEA has a key role to play, as well as organizations such as INPO (Institute of Nuclear Power Operations) and WANO (World Association of Nuclear Operators), but maximum safety also requires greater industry self-responsibility and control measures. In this regard, countries such as France and Japan have been rather less active, and there is perhaps value to be gained from naming and shaming deficient cases, and considering an increased role for insurance companies in promoting safer operations.

Panel group discussion included questions and comment regarding the crisis impact on Japanese public perception of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (almost overwhelmingly positive, as a force for domestic good); the Okinawa/Futenma base issue (specifically Okinawa media concern that the U.S. role in the crisis has further legitimated the rationale for U.S. forward bases); and whether the crisis and domestic recovery will lead to a more inward or outward-looking Japan. On the latter point, Noboru Yamaguchi proffered the comment that an inward looking Japan "cannot be!" and that the crisis should be viewed as an opportunity to change Japan's global outlook. The overall opinion was that the crisis has strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance relations, demonstrated the value of bilateral coordination and stimulated new initiatives, such as the decision to create a permanent, joint emergency response force.

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

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