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Lessons Learned from the Great East Japan Earthquake

Introduction

First I would like to offer my sympathies and condolences to those who have fallen victim to the Great East Japan Earthquake. Like many Americans, I was shocked by the triple tragedy of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power plant accident, and I was deeply impressed by the day-to-day efforts devoted toward saving human lives and rebuilding the afflicted areas. I feel somewhat hesitant to speak about domestic conditions in Japan from an “outsider’s perspective” today, only about 100 days after this tremendous disaster struck, but I would like to offer my personal opinions on the lessons that have emerged from Japan since the disaster. I have discussed on a separate occasion the topic of “large-scale disasters and the Japan-US Alliance,”¹ so this time I will address something more conceptual, lessons in the broad sense, one might say. More specifically, I will take up five issues – crisis management, energy security, dynamic defense, disaster relief, and international engagement – and attempt to get implications from those issues, and then offer my overall conclusions.

Five lessons

Let me begin with crisis management.

There have been a variety of criticisms levelled at the government’s responses to this disaster, and it would be hard to say that the Japanese government – and I might add the US government as well – was sufficiently prepared for a situation such as we have now with a natural disaster compounded by an industrial disaster; in one regard, this itself might serve as a lesson in crisis management. What I wish to point out, however, is that building public trust and confidence in the government’s ability to respond adequately to large-scale disasters will reinforce the government’s actual ability to handle disasters, so it is important that the government recognize this fact and seek to reform its systems and bureaucratic organizations accordingly. In other words, confidence-building efforts are required of the government from a dimension quite apart from the criticism to which it is being subjected by the media and others.

Second, there is energy security.

With this disaster having cast serious doubts on the future of nuclear energy, new discussions on energy policy are absolutely essential. These should be conducted on the premise of “safety underwrites economy”, however, and extreme caution should be taken to avoid kneejerk reactions about nuclear power. Given that no country is in the position to sustain its industrial status as a developed country on a single source of energy, making it crucial to secure a variety of energy sources, nuclear power, like it or not, will continue to occupy an important place. This will undoubtedly be a particularly difficult matter in post-disaster Japan, of course, but I believe that investing in new technology and energy-saving efforts, developing alternative energies in parallel with enhancements to nuclear power safety, and taking the initiative in forming and standardizing a “culture of safety” for science and technology will bring about even more benefits in the long run than making a trade-off between economic downsizing and safety. In any event, long-term and consistent efforts are needed.

What approach should be taken for the time being? Of particular concern to me here is that there seems to be a widespread misperception of the damage caused by nuclear power being far greater than it actually is. “Harmful rumors” come to mind within Japan itself, and outside the country there unfortunately remains a strongly-rooted tendency to conflate Japan’s overall image with radioactive contamination; it is urgent that people ascertain and become informed about the “true circumstances” without positive or negative exaggeration. The Kemeny Commission, an independent group of experts and intellectual, civil leaders organized in 1979 to investigate the circumstances at the Three-Mile Island nuclear power plant, can serve as a useful reference, as this Commission endeavored to dispel exaggerations through scientific verification. This could in no way have been accomplished at the time simply by the will of the Carter administration and, as a result, the Commission supplemented the government’s aforementioned crisis management capabilities. There is an urgent need for crisis management and safety/confidence-building efforts by industry itself, such as those being attempted by the US’ Institute of Nuclear Power Operations, as well as smother communications among institutions (e.g., among the relevant government ministries, agencies, and departments, and between the government and electric power companies), and combining these with sufficient reflection on such precedents is certainly also of value.

Third, there is dynamic defense.

This term itself is a keyword appearing in the National Defense Program Guidelines approved last December but, if I might expound on this in my own way, I believe this ultimately converges to the elements of mobilization and deployment capabilities. This

point is vividly illustrated not only by the capabilities to mobilize and deploy human resources on a large scale but also the capabilities of the SDF and the US military to carry out missions such as the swift restoration of the tsunami-damaged Matsushima ASDF base and Sendai Airport, rendered unusable by the disaster, as logistic bases for “Operation Tomodachi”, and these capabilities must be made even more efficient in future. Specifically, studies should be undertaken in three regards – inside the SDF, between the SDF and the US military, and between surrounding countries – with regard to improving intelligence-gathering process (in terms of both hardware and software, including eliminating dependence on the US military’s unmanned drones and making the dissemination of information seamless), strengthening Japan-US cooperation capabilities (establishing response plans for various scenarios, including disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and incidents in the area surrounding Japan, and forming a common chain of command) and maintaining the equipment that makes possible dynamic defense (establishing small-scale sites in numerous locations that can be used as bases during disasters).

Fourth, there is disaster recovery.

As I touched on earlier in part, the image of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power plant disaster reflected through various media has in a sense now taken root outside Japan. The notable divergence between this image and reality should be corrected, of course, but here I would like to present the idea of “turnaround.” My point is that it is incumbent upon the government in rebuilding the afflicted areas to move beyond literally “restoring areas to their original state” and “dealing with the aftermath” in creating new recovery models offering numerous possibilities, e.g., a green economy model, a safety model and a regional development model. While if natural disasters themselves are beyond human control, a diversity of options in responding to them should be available, and I sincerely hope that the Japanese public will adopt a shared orientation that generates one such opportunity from this disaster.

Finally, there is international engagement.

In connection with the aforementioned orientation, I think that Japan should contribute to the international community by relating to other countries its experiences of the recent earthquake/tsunami and nuclear power plant accident. Given that the IAEA, a specialized agency under UN auspices, has not necessarily performed its functions adequately in ensuring that countries adhere to norms for the use of nuclear power and, to put it rather bluntly, given that safety standards for nuclear facilities currently differ by country, Japan in particular could make a “smart and effective” contribution by actively calling for new safety standards based on its recent experiences and promoting wider introduction of

new-generation nuclear reactors. Considering other task, such as helping construct a regional disaster relief network for Asia, I can point that Japan should and could do a variety of things through turning away from its “introspective” mindset.

Conclusion – What has emerged from these lessons

If the five lessons discussed above were to be tied respectively to separate policy issues, what would be derived from making them abstract would be issues that go beyond the level of individual policies: confidence building, consensus formation, mobilization capabilities, formation of long-term perspectives, and humanitarianism. Thus, when looking from a wider perspective, it can be seen right away that these have in common the fact that they are all formats for expressing leadership. In other words, the lessons that I take away from the Great East Japan Earthquake are questions about Japan’s own perspective on leadership – what ultimately “drives” Japan, whether in domestic or foreign affairs – and Japan’s will to shape it. I know that Japan faces many problems domestically after the disaster, but inevitably the greatest challenge for Japan will be transcending individual interests to achieve the greatest efficiency in leadership, that is, to disregard minor differences and seek out the greater similarities in responding to disasters. That is my conclusion.

However, I am optimistic about the prospects in this regard and my mind’s image of Japan a decade after the disaster is truly a bright one, with the Tohoku region becoming a model environmental region for the rest of the world and transforming into an economy with diversification and high energy efficiency, with Japan boasting the capability to deal appropriately with natural, industrial and man-made disasters, with Self Defense Forces functioning efficiently in cooperation with other parties, and with the younger generations helping to build peace in regional and international dimensions. I am convinced that Japan will adeptly internalize the lessons I have described thus far, and I believe that the goal of a “desirable future” will serve as a driving force to clearly heighten awareness of the lessons of these circumstances and steer people toward achievement of this goal.

I have presented a mish-mash of personal views – you might even regard them simply as expressions of “American optimism” – but I would be genuinely pleased if my perspective as an outsider can offer you any suggestions.

¹ Patrick M. Cronin and Daniel M. Kliman, “From an “Alliance of Crisis” to Even Deeper Relations,” *Gaiko(Foreign Affairs)*, No. 7, May 2011