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JAPAN'S INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

Hiroshi Nakanishi

The March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake/Tsunami has unmistakably reordered Japan's political and economic priorities. It is important to note that the disaster struck at a time when Japan was reinventing itself, transforming beyond what it had been at the height of the economic bubble some 20 years ago – a major economic power yet lacking in political influence and cultural presence in the world. Since the disaster, Japan has been garnering the world's attention as much as, if not more than, in the economic bubble period, with its people's patience and social stability having generally been appraised positively.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.


The utmost priority of Japan for the moment is to proceed with reconstruction efforts built upon this positive image of Japanese social strength. This should not entail restoring the “old” Japan, however. Instead, Japan should aim at building a more disaster-resilient, amenity-oriented society that is also attractive not only in terms of the economy and manufacturing technology but in terms of culture and tourism.

There are too many tasks to be mentioned here. What is crucial, though, is to demonstrate stable economic management to secure the funds necessary for reconstruction work. This reconstruction must proceed despite the Japanese economy experiencing a long-term deflation and the worst budget deficit among the industrialized countries, a dilemma similar to sitting on the edge of a knife. Skillful fiscal and monetary policy and sound political judgment are needed to avoid a slide into economic recession and an increase in the interest rate of government bonds. Given that the United States and Europe are also facing serious fiscal and monetary circumstances, it is all the more important that Japan handle its economy properly and achieve economic growth through reconstruction without becoming a destabilizing factor for the international economy.

Secondly, it is also necessary for Japan to share its disaster experience internationally and contribute to the strengthening of global disaster prevention schemes. More than 150 countries around the globe have offered Japan assistance, with the US providing special assistance within the framework of the Japan-US alliance and France making contributions to help out the Fukushima nuclear accident. The Japanese government should disclose and share with the rest of the world as much data as possible on ways of minimizing the damage of a massive disaster/tsunami of an unexpected scale and on the preparations needed to prevent a serious nuclear accident caused by a natural disaster unprecedented in human experience, and help establish new safety standards.

A third task is the reinvigoration of economic diplomacy. Japan has made infrastructure exports one of the pillars of its economic development assistance overseas in recent years, promoting public-private partnerships in such fields as railroad construction, nuclear power generation and water supply

development. Exports of nuclear power equipment have no doubt suffered a serious blow due to the recent crisis, but an unchanged truth is that the world continues to search for more efficient energy sources and eco-friendly economic growth. Japan will be able to contribute to the world's infrastructure development by reviewing its energy policy and advancing technical innovation to attain more efficient and environmentally-friendly use of conventional fossil fuels, to enhance safety measures for nuclear energy and to promote alternative energy sources.

Japanese politics before the great disaster were obviously divided and weak. Japanese statesmen must be urged to overcome their divisions and make decisions from a wider standpoint by properly recognizing the basic tasks mentioned above. 

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