

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

IIPS

Institute for International
Policy Studies



The Japan Institute of
International Affairs

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

Editor:

Akio Watanabe

Editorial Board:

Masashi Nishihara
Naoko Saiki
Taizo Yakushiji

Online Publisher:

Yoshiji Nogami
President, JIIA

No.112. 18 March 2011

PRESENCE OF MIND NEEDED

Akio Watanabe


What we most need now is the presence of mind to deal with the current crisis. Back in World War II, Winston Churchill was quoted as saying in a speech that the maxim of the British people is "Business as usual." For the Japanese, who are undergoing a moment of truth, nothing is more appropriate than this message of Churchill's.

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 earthquake that struck off the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region at 2:46 p.m. on March 11 had an enormous magnitude of 9.0. The quake not only devastated buildings, roads, an airport and the rail system, but also triggered a tsunami that engulfed people with an intensity that went well beyond the estimate of Tohoku residents along the Pacific coast, who historically have experienced numerous tsunamis. At the time of writing, more than 15,000 people are dead or missing – a number that surpasses the death toll of the Kobe-Awaji Earthquake, which took the lives of 6,000 people 17 years ago, and that of the Isewan Typhoon, which killed more than 5,000 people 62 years ago.

What is unprecedented in the history of natural disasters is the fact that the quake has caused massive damage to nuclear reactors in Fukushima Prefecture and that, despite all-out efforts to minimize the damage, no one is yet sure how far the destruction will extend. People throughout Japan, and not just those living around the nuclear power plant, are breathlessly keeping their eyes on ever-changing developments.

It is thus no wonder that the world's attention is focused on the possible nuclear crisis. This is attested to by the fact that English-language newspapers are using the Japanese term "Fukushima Daiichi" in describing the nuclear power plant. However, it is regrettable that some of their reports lack balance and pose the danger of provoking excessive responses, as have often been caused by news reports describing events in distant areas. It has been reported that alarmed foreigners have already left the Tokyo metropolitan area, with some even having evacuated from Japan. These reports are having negative effects on foreign exchange and stock markets. The concern of people here and abroad is understandable. Yet the Japanese government, people and companies should keep their presence of mind and do what they have to do, which will enable Japan as a whole to maintain order and dignity and to get over this difficulty. This will not only serve the Japanese people, but should also contribute to minimizing the negative impact of the earthquake and the tsunami on the world economy. On top of everything, we must be careful not to stir up excessive anxiety. I am keen to remind opinion leaders here and abroad of this point.

On the other hand, harsh criticism of the lack of awareness and shortcomings in the crisis management capacity of the institutions in charge of Japan's nuclear energy policy, including Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), is necessary, even if the earthquake was of a once-in-a-millennium scale. One lesson we must learn from this crisis is the invalidity of the "myth of safety." The myth of safety is the belief that a dangerous situation will never happen and should not be allowed to happen. No belief is more removed from the principle of crisis management than this. A crisis will "occur" no matter how perfect the measures taken in advance are, and we must be prepared for the worst-case scenario. The presence of mind in the face of a crisis to deal with the situation and the principle of crisis management are two sides of the same coin. Getting over this crisis with composure is what the world expects of Japan. 

Akio Watanabe is Editor of AJISS-Commentary. He is also Vice Chairman of the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS).