

## “Disaster and Politics: Japan after March 11”

Wednesday, April 6, 2011

10:30am-12:10pm

The Dupont Hotel

This session evaluated the Japanese government’s response to the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011. Additionally, discussion focused on the long-term impact of the disaster on Japanese domestic politics and foreign relations.

### Dr. Andrew Oros, Panelist

(Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Washington College)

Dr. Oros began by drawing analogies to recent American audience experiences: 9/11, Katrina, and the Gulf Oil Spill. He pointed out that Katrina and the Gulf Oil Spill were immediately politicized, and 9/11 galvanized short-term unity but eventually led to domestic political splintering. Therefore, Dr. Oros agreed with Dr. Auslin that reconstruction will eventually become politicized.



On **crisis management**, Dr. Oros asserted that the Japanese government reaped the benefits of systemic improvements in response management. The 24-hour crisis management center is continually improving its processes, and the scale and timing of the SDF deployment was impressive, as was the comprehensive support of U.S. military and expertise.

However, this crisis shows the importance of contingency planning and of collaborative procedures built up over time. It is impossible to prepare for all contingencies, but US and Japanese forces should be more interoperable. Dr. Oros told an anecdote of a large water tank airlifted by the U.S. military into the disaster zone to provide fresh water. Unfortunately, the Japanese hose size was different and did not fit the tank, and it took nearly three days to fabricate a compatible converter from nearby scrap metal.

On **international relations**, Dr. Oros expressed regret that the earthquake and tsunami do not change Japan’s security atmosphere in any substantial way. He warned that there may now be a movement to draw back on Japan’s tentative, but growing, eagerness to participate in regional security planning. Dr. Oros said that this trend, coupled with a gradual worsening of Japan’s overall security environment throughout the last few years, are a cause for concern.

On the worsening of the security environment, Dr. Oros talked mainly about Sino-Japanese relations. During the Senkaku crisis last year, there was a huge decline in bilateral relations, and the underlying problems and tensions in this relationship remain prominent. The tone of much of the discussion on Chinese aid is very different than that of South Korea. The South Korean government has made consistent efforts to reassure citizens that Japanese food is safe and that Japanese-Korean trade does not decrease. The Chinese government has been less forthright.

On **domestic politics and reconstruction**, Dr. Oros asserted that Japan’s security policies interlinked with domestic politics. He underscored that all the major challenges that Japan faces now are the same challenges that Japan faced the day before the crisis: mounting debt, fiscal unsustainability, demographic challenges (declining birth rate and urbanization), etc. It would be short-sighted to reconstruct the affected area to how it was before, but that is a difficult move politically to make structural changes. Moving some government functions to Sendai is an innovative, but potentially beneficial solution. Ultimately, what Japan needs after this crisis

remains the same: to establish political consensus on the proper approach to strengthen Japan's fundamentals.

Finally, Dr. Oros expressed optimism that Japan's tremendous intellectual and social capital will provide the foundation for a bold new national vision. Japan remains a vibrant and creative place. Last week, TEPCO did not have to institute rolling blackouts because of voluntary restrictions in energy use. Looking to the future of Japan, we must involve young people and promote their innovative ideas. A bold new vision for Japan may emerge from this crisis, despite the obvious political challenges.