

“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.

Question and Answer Period

On **reconstruction**, the central government has stated that it will pay for almost all of reconstruction. This is a double-edged sword for local governments. On the one hand, it reduces their financial burden. On the other hand, it implies less latitude and jurisdiction over the reconstruction effort.



On **TEPCO**, panelists suggested that a long period of analysis and investigation will ensue. Is it true that TEPCO initially hesitated to take the extreme step of putting seawater into the facility because they knew it would destroy the facility?

Dr. Tanaka observed that on **TEPCO**, it is very difficult to make a fair judgment on the crisis response without a deep understanding of the problem. He speculated that this is an instance of typical malfunction in organizations. TEPCO is a huge organization with myriad divisions of expertise and labor, and you cannot do well that which you have not practiced. In many ways, the President and Chairman cannot easily intervene in the specialized departments and the devastation of backups and contingencies at Fukushima exceeded their assumptions. These are complex issues with lots of trade-offs.

On the **impact of this on the alliance at the local level**, Dr. Oros does not believe that this will create a groundswell of appreciation for U.S. basing and the U.S.-Japan alliance at the local level. The media in Okinawa does not emphasize the beneficial role of U.S. relief as much as *Asahi Shimbun*. The major media organizations in Okinawa are not the same dominant media outlets in most of Japan. Dr. Oros has actually read concerns that mainlanders will have an increased need for forces without a concomitant willingness to host the increased forces. So, this disaster is not likely change the nature of the Futenma debate; in some ways, it may exacerbate the debate.

On the **impact of the disaster on cultural exchanges**, Dr. Auslin speculated that they may benefit in the short-term. This could be a wonderful way to focus our exchanges on the affected region—to send artists and experts and individuals with intellectual capital of all different stripes to travel to the region and take part in a comprehensive effort to rebuild Japanese society and economy. However, the first priority is to get the nuclear crisis under control. Without that important step, it would be unwise to overtly encourage foreign citizens to come to the affected area.