

“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. Akihiko Tanaka, Moderator
(Chair, USJI / Vice President, The University of Tokyo)

First, Dr. Tanaka paid special thanks to the 20,000+ U.S. servicemen for their immediate assistance following the earthquake. He called the *USS Ronald Reagan* a new symbol of U.S.-Japanese solidarity. He informed the audience that the 25 faculty, staff, and students located at Tokyo University’s marine center in the disaster zone had all escaped to safety, although the buildings were destroyed. Aside from that center, the five founding members of the USJI suffered minimal damage, though changes to class schedules and lab management must be made in light of the uncertainty of future supply of electricity and the ongoing nuclear crisis.



Dr. Tanaka pointed out that, notwithstanding the resilience of Japan, the country overall is in the throes of the greatest national crisis since WWII. It faces three separate crises: the earthquake, the tsunami, and the nuclear crisis. Moreover, these crises struck when the Japanese government was very weak. Politically, public support for the Kan administration was in the 20 percent range prior to the crisis, and the upper house was controlled by the opposition party. Economically, the debt-to-GDP ratio was approaching historic heights, and myriad long-term problems remain.

Given this context, several questions emerge in the wake of March 12: **What are the near-term and medium-term implications for Japanese politics?**

On **crisis management**, we must divide it up into three areas of analysis: the response of the country as a whole, the response of the Japanese government, and the response of Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO).

- § First, considering the unprecedented scale of the disasters, the **crisis management in the nation as a whole** has been relatively good. Japan has little consolation for the dead and missing, the devastated towns, and the damage to infrastructure. But, we must be reminded that the substantial majority of people were saved as a result of emergency survival practices and routines. While the number of houses destroyed is around 200,000, the number of dead and missing is far less at 30,000.
- § Second, the **crisis management of the Kan government** has not been perfect, but it has been better than the response after the 1995 Kobe earthquake. Mr. Kan responded fairly quickly and mobilized self-defense forces (SDF) immediately. On this comparison, Dr. Tanaka speculated that the timing and location of the earthquake may have enabled the more proactive response this time. Given the location of the earthquake, all people in Tokyo knew immediately that a natural disaster had occurred. In response to criticism of the government for generating confusion with their information dissemination

system, Dr. Tanaka reasoned that the press secretary tried his best and government response in this regard was adequate.

- § Third, and in contrast to these two aforementioned categories, the **crisis management by TEPCO** over the nuclear crisis has been worse. Dr. Tanaka emphasized the heroism of the workers at the Fukushima plant for their courageous efforts. But despite their work, the end of the tunnel still appears far away. The crisis management of TEPCO appears terribly wanting. It was unfortunate that the Chairman and the President were away from Tokyo during the earthquake and the President fell ill shortly thereafter. The public was not sure who was in charge. These were avoidable problems.

On the **political implications**, Dr. Tanaka provided several points.

One obvious impact is a **cease-fire of domestic politics**. Four days before March 11, the opposition successfully pressured Foreign Minister Maehara to step down for receiving illegal political contributions, and Prime Minister Kan's approval rating dipped below 20%. But now, the general election demanded by the opposition has become physically impossible in the coming months. Moreover, the Japanese Supreme Court decision on March 23, which ruled that the current lower house voting system is unconstitutional, made an early general election legally questionable.

Public opinion now looks more favorably on Mr. Kan, although it is still quite low. 28% might support it now (compared to 19% before the crisis). In the face of the overwhelming needs of reconstruction, the opposition has now modified their political demands and must cooperate to implement the new year's fiscal budget and implement a supplementary budget as well as other necessary fiscal measures, including potential new taxes.

As local election campaigns are now going on in unaffected areas, including Tokyo metropolitan area, opposition politicians are not ready to join the government now. But after these elections, a grand coalition between the DPJ and LDP may be possible, or a minimum winning coalition, or a virtual coalition, remains to be seen. Also, whether Mr. Kan will survive in such a coalition remains hard to judge. In any case, I expect some time of grand coalition with Mr. Kan retaining leadership is possible.

The disaster is an excuse for the DPJ to revise some of their fiscally dubious policies, and so the DPJ may accept the opposition's demand to virtually scrap childcare subsidies, free high school tuition, and free highway tolls. Indeed, the ceasefire may continue for the next year. It will continue until a new apportionment of electoral districts is made. It is now quite possible to have the double elections of both lower and upper houses in July 2013.

During this potential political cease-fire, what should be the policy priorities?

Japan's **foreign policy** will not change much. The U.S.-Japan alliance may spike in popularity, but the domestic needs of reconstruction may constrain Japan's international assertiveness and engagement.

As for Japanese **domestic policy**, the minimum necessary measures of reconstruction will consume most of the government's time. Spending on infrastructure and assistance will increase. Yet, at the same time, one need not forget that Japan is still in the midst of a long-term economic crisis. Efforts now should be consistent with the long-term strategies urgently needed to rebuild a new Japan.

Japan must revise its **energy policy**. In light of the disaster, Japan's commitment to reduce greenhouse gases by 25% may be more difficult to achieve and reliance on oil and gas will likely increase, at least in the near-term. But, Japan cannot simply abolish its nuclear energy. It must revamp its energy practices, and this may require lifestyle changes.

On **urban and rural land-use policies**, future natural disasters may occur and Japanese must maximally utilize lessons from past natural disasters. Visionary urban-rural planning should be implemented. Model towns—safe, sustainable, friendly to aging populations, and good for agricultural productivity—should be implemented.

Finally, **tax and political reform** is necessary. Japan cannot depend on government bonds indefinitely. District-system reform to reduce voting power disparity and reconsideration of the power of the Upper House are also necessary. Japanese politics must deliver in terms of reconstruction. It should be visionary and far-sighted and create the basis of a new Japan.