

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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Turning Disaster into Opportunity
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Japan is struggling in the face of a tough and complex crisis involving an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear plant accident. People are worried about the demonstrated weakness of the government's response to the triple disasters and how Japan will handle the ongoing nuclear crisis in Fukushima; how Japan's domestic industrial base and economy will recover from the severe blow it has suffered; and how Japanese political leaders can demonstrate the capacity to manage crises since the people have witnessed a prolonged paralysis at the top since the departure of the last strong leader, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006). Criticism of Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO) response to the nuclear crisis has also amplified global skepticism about Japan's crisis management.

In addition, questions about transparency and the accurate, timely dissemination of information by Japanese government leaders and TEPCO may fuel suspicion in many countries. These information disclosure issues can be considered some of the most significant challenges facing Japan today. Japan has a long history of promoting those who excelled as foot soldiers to positions of leadership. But a wealth of experience in ground-level situations does not automatically translate into the right kind of strategic capacity at the leadership level. This problem is discussed at length in academic works such as *Shippai no Honshitsu* (The Essence of Failure) regarding the shortcomings and strategic failure of Japan's wartime military leadership.¹

In contrast, the world has been impressed by the orderly behavior of Japanese citizens confronting adversity and the social capital and cohesion that are pillars of Japan's strength. Many have admired the lack of violence and looting and the calmness, patience, and stoic forbearance of those affected. Few countries could expect this sort of behavior from their citizens. There is also great admiration globally for the technicians and other personnel taking great personal risk to deal with crisis control at the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Station. Observers of Japanese society may wonder why the quality of the political leadership is so poor and why it does not reflect the grassroots virtues commonly displayed among the people.

Responsibility for overcoming Japan's current difficulties will fall squarely on the shoulders of current and future leaders and opinion makers. If Japan can move forward and surmount the current crisis, it will be stronger in the face of future challenges. But if Japan fails to overcome its weaknesses, the threat of future crises could easily multiply. One potential source of strength is the remarkable social cohesion and resilience of the Japanese people in the face of some 30,000 dead or missing. This might discourage other countries from resorting to acts of violence and intimidation against Japan and is an element of the country's strength in national security, which can also extend to the economic domain to engender greater trust in the nation's products and the national economy itself. But the fundamental determinant of Japan's future will be the capacity of its political leaders.

The Kan Administration's Approach to Crisis Management

Can Japan overcome the current crisis and sow the seeds of future success? It is too early to know. However, so far, the administration of Prime Minister Naoto Kan has adopted some strategic moves in crisis management that herald a stronger Japan despite growing criticism of the government's policy management. Kan deserves more credit than he has been given in making these bold moves.

First, 100,000 troops of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) were immediately mobilized for search-and-rescue missions on an unprecedented scale. Their steadfast efforts in helping the people affected by the disaster have greatly improved the image of the SDF among the people and may act as a significant deterrent to aggression toward Japan.

¹ Ryoichi Tobe, Yoshiya Teramoto, Sinnichi Kamata, Takao Sugino, Tomohide Murai, and Ikujiro Nonaka, *Shippai no Honshitsu* [The Essence of Failure] (Tokyo: Diamond, Inc., 1984).

Second, through Operation Tomodachi (“friend” in Japanese), the U.S. military in cooperation with the SDF conducted search-and-rescue operations and provided relief aid using 20,000 military personnel and 20 vessels on a scale unthinkable in normal times. U.S. support was vital and much appreciated, and the SDF and U.S. forces demonstrated close coordination, displaying the depth of Japan’s security resources to the world.

Third, the Kan administration ordered the closing of the Hamaoka Nuclear Plant, which is located in Shizuoka prefecture about 189 kilometers from the Tokyo metropolitan area. The plant is located above a tectonic fault line, where experts warn of an impending large-scale earthquake, estimating an 87 percent probability of occurrence in the next 30 years. This was a strategic decision because an accident at the Hamaoka plant would imperil Tokyo and the lives of the 30 million residents living in the greater metropolitan area. Another nuclear power plant disaster would seriously damage Japan’s credibility as a country with advanced science and technology and could devastate the national economy with global implications far exceeding the fallout from the Fukushima disaster. Given Japan’s already huge public debt (over 200 percent of GDP) and deficit spending, an accident involving Tokyo would roil global financial markets. Kan’s decision to shut down the Hamaoka plant has drawn severe criticism because of the negative impact on immediate economic activity. Currently, the operations of 15 nuclear reactors, out of a total of 54, have been stopped or suspended due to the earthquake and tsunami or regular inspections in Japan. If the suspensions continue into the summer, Japan may suffer chronic shortages of electricity. Kan’s decision was criticized as too sudden and based on a weak legal foundation, but the decision was actually bold in weighing the short-term costs of a shutdown against the potential for catastrophic losses in the worst-case scenario.

The fourth strategic move was the establishment on May 24 of an investigation committee consisting of 10 experts and chaired by Yotaro Hatamura, professor emeritus of engineering at the University of Tokyo, to study the Fukushima nuclear accident. The committee should have included experts from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but Japan instead accepted an IAEA investigation team on May 25. Both the Japanese government and the IAEA submitted reports at the IAEA ministerial meeting in Vienna on June 20. While Japan has innumerable issues to wrestle with in the near future, it is imperative that the government learn lessons from the nuclear crisis and share its experience with the rest of the world. A cover-up or superficial whitewash would have many negative repercussions. Japan must have a transparent investigation that documents how the Japanese government and TEPCO handled the nuclear crisis—both strengths and weaknesses. There is still much that the world does not know about Japan’s response to the current crisis, in addition to many misapprehensions and overreactions.

The investigation must be conducted beyond partisan party lines. In the United States, a bipartisan commission produced a report on the government’s response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The report provided much valuable information to both the U.S. government and Congress and led to numerous improvements. Moreover, the report demonstrated to the world the strength and transparency of American democracy. In comparison, Japan has a weak history of disclosing information to the public. But if, in spite of this weakness, Japan establishes a nonpartisan investigative committee with adequate powers, it could positively impact recovery efforts and put wind in the sails of civil society. By strengthening information disclosure, transparency, and accountability, the investigating committee can improve governance and help regain public and international trust in Japanese leadership.

Stronger Leadership?

Despite these strategic moves by the Kan administration, translating them into sustainable success depends on nurturing strong political leaders and enhancing their capacity in crisis management. I am cautiously optimistic about the future of political leadership and crisis management in Japan. I believe that the current weak leadership and poor crisis management is not an unchangeable aspect of Japanese nature, but rather a phenomena resulting from the idiosyncratic Japanese political structure and culture that emerged in the wake of World War II. For example, there had been no real competition among political parties until 2009. Prior to that, for all but 10 months, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presided over a one-party democracy since it was established in 1955. While Japan enjoyed unprecedented political stability, there was no serious competition and thus little in the way of strong individual leadership. It is natural that less competition results in poor performance, and Japan’s democracy suffered from sclerosis. In addition, the Japanese people have been very reluctant to trust their political leaders with strong powers even for temporary crisis management. This reluctance stems from a widespread perception that political leaders have failed to distinguish themselves and from memories of wartime abuses during the 1930s and 1940s.

For example, Article 9 of the Constitution, which renounces war, has been unchallenged in the political world, although it creates many shortcomings in terms of national security policy. Rational and sincere proposals for revision of Article 9 have been defeated by an emotional antiwar sentiment. The same holds true in preparing emergency legislation or imposing martial law; Japan’s military allergy remains strong. People cannot get over the anxiety that facilitating strong leadership might be a slippery slope toward dictatorship. Precisely because of this situation, the Kan administration seems to be weak in managing TEPCO and other organizations involved in the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear plant. In short, Japanese leaders

do not have the executive powers necessary for effective crisis management. Since 1945, Japan has been fortunate to avoid significant crises, but the vacuum of power at the top is a major liability.

Preparation for a nuclear crisis, whether an accident or military attack, has been impeded by the nuclear taboo stemming from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Looking back at the postwar period, conservatives have avoided discussing worst-case nuclear scenarios because they feared public controversy stemming from any challenge to the myth of 100 percent safety in nuclear reactors, or Japan's decision not to own nuclear weapons despite the fact that not doing so does not guarantee safety from nuclear attack. Liberals also did not entertain practical discussions on crisis management for nuclear accidents or deterrence against potential nuclear aggressors because they were afraid that such debates may compromise their positions against nuclear plants or nuclear weapons. After the recent failure of practical preparation for a nuclear disaster, Japan needs to shake off these constraints to develop a realistic and effective crisis management capacity.

Even before the 3/11 earthquake, institutional and legal shortcomings affecting disaster management were evident. The Kan administration adopted the new National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) in December 2010 that proposed creating a crisis management center modeled on the U.S. National Security Council. Indeed, it is overdue homework for Japan's leadership. The plan is very similar to what the Abe administration proposed in 2007 when the LDP held power. It is good news that the ruling party and the largest opposition party both understand the need to bolster the government's crisis management capacity. That is a source of optimism for the future course of Japanese leadership. It is always difficult for people to imagine and prepare for crisis in the abstract, so the Great East Japan Earthquake has created a window of opportunity to facilitate overdue reforms that can improve governance.

Looking back at modern Japanese history, Japan succeeded in changing its grand strategy during the Meiji Restoration from the mid-nineteenth century and again during the U.S. Occupation in the mid-twentieth century. The road to reconstruction from the 3/11 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis will be long and involve many difficult steps, but it may well lead to Japan's third transformation. Needless to say, strong political leadership will be indispensable to realize this promise. Hopefully, tough lessons for Japanese leaders and citizens can galvanize reform initiatives that will shake the nation out of the torpor that has prevailed for far too long. The Japanese people's strength in crisis should serve as an inspiration for strong political leaders. It is about time.

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