Japan in a Post 3/11 World

Contributed by Daniel Sneider
Friday, 07 October 2011

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After a triple crisis, Japan’s politics are in gridlock over nuclear power

On March 11 of this year, Japan was struck by a triple disaster. An earthquake on a scale unseen in a millennium shook the northern half of the main island of Honshu. A stunning tsunami then swept away entire communities along the island’s northeast Pacific coastline. In its wake, the wave left a complex of nuclear power plants without power, causing a meltdown whose radioactive consequences are still not fully under control.

Japanese refer to these disasters by the shorthand of “3/11.” It is a self-conscious reference to 9/11, evoking not only the sudden and terrible nature of the two events, but also their ongoing, transformative character.

On my first visit to Japan since that day, I found a country still completely mired in the disaster. Seismically, barely a day goes by without aftershocks as the earth settles from the tectonic shift that took place six months ago, some strong enough to send my Tokyo hotel room vibrating for what seemed like minutes. In the northeast, recovery is slow as entire communities contemplate whether they even have a future.

Most of all, the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear power plant remains unresolved – cold shutdown is incomplete, and every day Japanese newspapers print maps of radiation readings spreading outward from the plant. Fewer than a dozen of Japan’s 54 nuclear power plants are operating, forcing people to dim office lights, turn off electric hand dryers in toilets and take other conservation measures.

In this post-3/11 world, Japan’s leaders are focused almost entirely inward. Other than a deepening worry over the fate of the global economy and a consequent domestic slowdown, the government’s foreign policy now consists of “preserving the status quo,” a senior foreign ministry official told me, avoiding anything which can divert attention from the tasks at hand. Alongside economic recovery, the most urgent issue is the future of nuclear energy, now the main arena to fight out Japan’s political, social and economic future.

These challenges are compounded by a failure of governance. The ruling Democratic Party of Japan, which ended a half-century of conservative Liberal Democratic Party control in 2009, has been unable to deliver on either its agenda of reform or provide leadership. Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda is the third DPJ premier as the party struggles with deep internal divisions, divided control of two houses of parliament, and stiff opposition from a powerful bureaucracy and its allies, including in the media.

Japan seems permanently choking in a poisonous atmosphere of partisan politics and a gridlock that rivals the one in Washington. The mainstream media, long a guardian of the political order, now relentlessly pursues “scandal.” These are not the fruit of investigative research, but rather a thirst for gaffes and hints of political payola to generate headlines and embarrass politicians.

All these elements have come together in post-3/11 Japan in a fierce debate over nuclear energy. The electric power industry in Japan is a classic example of the system that created the postwar economic miracle. Power companies were organized as regional monopolies, vertically integrated from the plants to the power lines, working in close coordination with the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). The ministry not only promoted the growth of nuclear energy – Japan ranks third in the world, after the US and France, in the amount of electricity generated by nuclear plants – but also served as its regulator. This collusive “nuclear power village,” as it is popularly known, includes politicians backed by the wealthy firms, the most powerful of which is Tokyo Electric Power, or Tepco.

This system worked wonderfully in Japan’s developmental rise. It marshaled resources and responded quickly to national goals, such as the drive for energy conservation and efficiency following the oil shock of the early 1970s. But it failed to push for the development of alternative energy sources, and its regulatory oversight was notoriously lax, leading to accidents, including a plant shutdown following a 2007 earthquake in northern Japan.

When 3/11 struck, Prime Minister Naoto Kan was a captive of the “nuclear village.” During the early hours of the Fukushima crisis, Kan, an avowed foe of the bureaucracy, tried to reassure an increasingly terrified Japanese public even as he demanded Tepco and its METI overseers to bring the plant under control. In the view of his foes, Kan was an inept leader, failing to use established mechanisms of the bureaucracy and interfering with their ability to handle the crisis. Kan, particularly in recent interviews, describes himself as dragging a collusive system to act to save the country rather than protect its investment in nuclear power.

Ultimately the worst may have been averted. But Kan lost his job because he was widely perceived – or rather portrayed by a largely hostile media – as incompetent. Thanks to independent media that live-streamed Tepco press conferences to the web, going around the mainstream media, the Japanese public also saw a company that failed to plan for safety and covered up mistakes. Anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan, fed by memories of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has exploded.

The formation of a new government offers some glimmer of hope of more stable governance. A low-key pragmatist and deficit hawk, Noda has restored some authority to the bureaucracy, tried to forge party unity, and explored the formation of a “grand coalition” with the conservative opposition to face the country’s post-3/11 reconstruction tasks. He backed away somewhat from Kan’s strident anti-nuclear message, stressing the need to reopen closed plants to avoid an energy crisis next spring.

The wars, however, continue only slightly below the surface. The METI minister appointed by Noda was forced to resign within weeks after the media jumped on his comment that the evacuated area around the Fukushima plant had become a “ghost town.” That remark was oddly labeled as insensitive. He added fuel to the media fire by making an off-the-record joke after visiting the plant, duly reported, about radiation. Independent Japanese media suggest he was targeted for his anti-nuclear stance.

In the Diet, Tepco outraged parliament members when it met repeated requests for copies of accident manuals by turning over heavily redacted documents. Former DPJ Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama showed me the blacked-out documents: “There is a great deal that Tokyo Electric is still not telling us. I believe the government should have, and must now more strongly insist on the information being given to the government. The response to their obstructionism hasn’t been sufficient.”

A few days later the government’s nuclear watchdog agency joined this chorus. Huge fights loom over a bailout of Tepco with public money and proposals to break up regional power monopolies.

Privately some in the DPJ worry that the party has retreated so far from its original purpose that it lost its ability to appeal to an electorate that still favors change. A senior DPJ leader told me that while “Noda isn’t bad,” he worries the party is becoming “a mirror image of the LDP.” Others argue that Noda has more steel in his spine, including for long-term reform, than is evident.

The Japanese retain the strengths of a resourceful, disciplined people, traits evident in the early days after the quake. But they desperately need good governance and leadership to steer a path through the debris and tremors of post-3/11 Japan. A window of opportunity remains open, but it’s difficult to say for how long.

(Daniel Sneider, a former foreign correspondent, is the associate director for research of Stanford University’s Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center.)