PacNet
Number 22

Pacific Forum CSIS
Honolulu, Hawaii

April 13, 2011

Japan Needs 'a New Deal'
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Franklin Delano Roosevelt entered office amidst an historic internal disaster. Although FDR exuded a confidence to inspire a nation, he had no clear action plan for managing the Great Depression. Instead, the 31st President experimented and experimented with a vengeance. In the words of Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, he hewed to the "faith that the right solution to a vexing problem would eventually turn up." The net result was a New Deal that renewed a paralyzed nation.

Japan faces a unique but similarly monumental internal challenge. After the calamity of 3/11 subsides, Japan will require a New Deal to restore a nation. Once the immediate nuclear dangers are contained, a new type of politics will be needed and expected. If Japanese leaders simply rebuild what has been destroyed, they will have missed a rare opportunity for leadership.

As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visits Japan this week, she will deservedly praise the Japanese people and US-Japan alliance cooperation. She should also encourage Japanese leaders to use this unprecedented calamity to map out a vision and strategy for renewing Japan.

Secretary Clinton should further encourage Japanese leaders to take a page from FDR: they should not wait for customary central plans to be finalized but instead put in motion the best ideas available now to help the Japanese people avoid turning down and inward. In Silicon Valley, as Professor Daniel Okimoto reminds this writer, pragmatic experimentation is known as "iteration" – constant trial and error and refinement and tinkering until an optimal solution can be found.

Prime Minister Kan Naoto deserves full support during this crisis. A grand coalition providing unified leadership across the major parties would be welcome. But as the crisis subsides and politics return, the responsibility to motivate, innovate, and rejuvenate Japan is likely to soon fall on the shoulders of the next generation of political leaders in the ruling Democratic Party of Japan. Younger DPJ politicians like Shinji Tarutoko, Goshi Hosono, Yoshihiko Noda, and Seiji Maehara (all under 55 years of age) must rise to this momentous occasion.

This will not happen overnight. For perhaps more than a year or two, Japan inevitably will turn further inward. Still, the major aspects of renewal will have clear international dimensions to Japan's vibrant recovery. These pillars of renewal involve decisions about nuclear energy, military force, and health security – issues that were important before the disaster and are now even more profound.

First, as Japan grapples with the question of its reliance on nuclear energy, it can advance global nuclear safety and nonproliferation. Three Mile Island froze the nuclear industry in the United States for 30 years. Like Newton's third law of motion, the force of the Fukushima meltdown threatens to create an equal and opposite force that would freeze nuclear power in Japan. While the subject deserves serious debate, alternative energy sources will be scarce in the foreseeable future. It will be decades before alternative renewable sources of energy come onto the grid and are in a position to replace nuclear power as a major source of energy for a modern economy.

Japanese self-confidence in their scientific and technological prowess is shaken. That is unfortunate and unfounded. The nuclear reactors appear to have performed as designed: shutting down as a result of a 9.0 earthquake. The failure appears to have been in not contemplating the massive tsunami, which destroyed the vital cooling system required to avoid a meltdown.

The government of Japan promises to conduct a thorough lessons-learned study that it will share with the world. It should do more than that. Japan needs to reassess the structure and oversight of its entire energy agency. It needs to create an effective and centralized emergency-response agency akin to the US Federal Emergency Management Agency so that the government is better prepared for risk management and crisis response.

Japanese officials should also study how to make international civil nuclear programs less dangerous. Some under-developed and closed countries already have or are contemplating to build nuclear reactors. Virtually all of them lack Japan's technical safeguards to avoid spewing radiation in the event of disaster, natural or man-made. Unfortunately, what happens in remote areas does not necessarily stay in remote areas.

Rendering nuclear fuel safer around the globe will require significant government investment to develop leading-edge reactors that radically reduce the danger from incidents. Japan's study can also point the direction for the international community to come together and regulate civil nuclear programs globally so that they pose a diminished risk of arming rogue actors with nuclear weapons.

While any nuclear renaissance has been put on hold as a result of the Fukushima meltdown, a military renaissance appears ready to emerge. With 100,000 troops mobilized for disaster relief, the Self-Defense Forces of Japan (SDF) have crossed a postwar hurdle by proving to the Japanese people

their indisputable relevance. The SDF have also shown that they can work with other nations in the face of a crisis.

The SDF have worked seamlessly with the US armed forces, including forces that Secretary Clinton will rightfully praise at the end of this week in Japan. US civilian and military leaders should be ready to seize the opportunity implied by this combined crisis response: to move toward genuine, NATO-style military interoperability for a range of missions, perhaps starting with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Meanwhile, US forces have amply illustrated the life-saving role played by the US military presence, which should put to rest much of the pre-disaster concerns about the value of those in Japan.

The third opportunity and challenge to disaster is coming to grips with Japan's health security. For an aging society like Japan, health security is national security. Japan now has the opportunity and the need to advance health care and medicine to new heights, both for internal rejuvenation (literally) and for soft-power influence as a model for other aging societies and as an engine of economic growth in the 21st century. Government, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations can collaborate together and internationally to make this initiative a transformative one.

A health security investment can respond to issues related to disasters, including concerns over radiation, but it should expand into a comprehensive investment that taps the scientific and technical expertise of Japan. And as with nuclear lessons learned and safeguarding global civil nuclear programs, Japan should widely share the fruits of its advances.

In these still solemn days after the earthquake and tsunami, it is not too early for Japan to envisage the kind of leadership it will need to revive the nation. A New Deal built on clean energy, security, and health care can give priority and focus to the cacophony of well-intentioned proposals emanating from many circles. Other important investments, such as in clean technology and transportation infrastructure that can also help restore Japan to the center of the region's economic growth, will be important, too.

But the central message Secretary Clinton might convey to the Japanese people relates to a willingness to tinker and adjust and experiment to restore momentum to Japan. As FDR knew, the most important thing in dealing with a massive disaster is to try out your best ideas even when you lack certitude about where they will end up. This is the foremost challenge for Japan's leadership.

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