

## **The Risks of ‘Disaster Nationalism’**

by Jeffrey W. Hornung, Ph.D.

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A common sight seen throughout Japan these days are signs that read *Ganbaro Nippon* (translated “Don’t give up Japan”). It has become the battle cry among Japanese for dealing with the aftermath of the March 11 earthquake-triggered disasters. In a country united by shared grief and suffering, it is a plea by Japanese for Japanese to struggle together through the difficulties.

Yet, this focus on shared pain carries with it a potentially negative consequence for Japan’s foreign engagement. The Japanese people’s singular focus on domestic recovery – which can best be termed “Disaster Nationalism” – has the potential of constraining the political elite’s ability to promote new foreign policy initiatives.

Last month I was in Tokyo meeting with officials in Japan’s Foreign Ministry. The common theme throughout every meeting was that Japan’s foreign policy establishment prioritized keeping the country globally engaged. This includes programs and initiatives already under way, such as the anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, fighting AIDS and malaria throughout the world, and curbing greenhouse gas emissions. It also includes new ideas, such as expanding Japan’s international role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, given how successful its Self-Defense Forces have been in recovery efforts. The problem is, without political leadership, there is a danger that existing initiatives could be cut while new initiatives will never get off the ground.

It is no secret that Japan suffers from a political leadership deficit. Ever since the charismatic Junichiro Koizumi stepped down as premier in 2006, Japan has had a new prime minister every year. This makes it difficult to establish a strategic vision. As much as Foreign Ministry officials promote initiatives to maintain Japan’s global engagement, without the political leadership to bring them to fruition, they have little chance of survival.

This is where the Japanese people’s reaction to the March 11 disasters matter. The people’s focus has been on recovery. This is understandable given the devastation and loss of life. However, many Japanese officials fear that this singular focus will intensify so much that, in feeling a sense of solidarity about the suffering brought on by the disaster, the people will

not only pull together but turn inward. Thus, at the societal level, the people will lose interest in anything not related to themselves. The result will be a desire to withdraw from things not Japan-related. The motivation for international engagement, let alone interest in international issues, will be the farthest thing from Japanese people’s concern.

At the political level, this will mean political leadership will have no support to take new foreign policy initiatives. No matter how much the foreign policy establishment wants to remain globally engaged, if the people do not want their government to launch new foreign initiatives, the government will be constrained. This could even make it difficult to maintain current initiatives.

For example, officials lament the political decision to cut Japan’s Official Development Assistance by 10 percent, seen as the most successful tool in Tokyo’s foreign policy arsenal.

Officials believe there are already signs of this constraining mechanism at work. Since the disaster, there have been many international issues for Japan to lend its voice. Be it the attack on Libya, the Arab Spring, or the International Monetary Fund succession, there has been numerous opportunities for political leadership to promote Japan’s interests. Yet, other than tepid official statements, Tokyo has been virtually invisible. Without denying current Prime Minister Naoto Kan’s weakness as a factor, officials believe the people’s inward focus cannot be ignored as a factor.

It is understandable that the government needs to focus on rebuilding. However, this cannot be at the risk of burying its head in the sand. International events that concern Japan’s national interest will not wait. Many of these, such as territorial issues involving Japan, require Tokyo to be proactive.

Governments can and must multitask. Japan’s foreign policy establishment wants to remain internationally engaged, but they do not have the platform or authority to convince the Japanese people not to turn inward in shared grief. This is the responsibility of the politicians. Political leadership is needed to convince the Japanese people not only of the importance of international engagement, but how it can and will multitask.

Japan’s political and bureaucratic elite fought hard throughout the postwar era for the country to be seen as a state that makes international contributions commensurate with its economic standing. Despite two decades of economic malaise, Japan remains an important global actor.

Be it in the fields of technology, transnational disease, poverty or the environment; funding for international organizations like the World Bank and IMF; serving as the most important U.S. ally and forward base; or serving as a successful democratic development model, Japan’s contributions make it a continuing important actor today. If

Japan's political leadership allows itself to be constrained by disaster nationalism, it risks this and, thus, Japan's global standing.

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