

Japan John Swenson-Wright

Japanese soldiers at an earthquake and tsunami-hit area in Kesenuma, northeastern Japan.



Heavy History

In the wake of one of the deadliest natural disasters to strike Japan since the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, the government of Prime Minister Naoto Kan has suddenly been required to demonstrate its ability to lead, reassure and inspire confidence amongst a population reeling from the after-effects of an unprecedentedly powerful earthquake and tsunami, and the potentially deadly leak of radiation from the Fukushima nuclear reactor.

IT IS, PERHAPS, TOO EARLY TO JUDGE THE GOVERNMENT. IN THE INITIAL STAGES OF THE CRISIS, THE SPEED WITH WHICH the government accepted international offers of support and the rapid dispatch of some 100,000 Japan Self-Defense Force (SDF) personnel to aid the victims of the disaster suggested that Kan and his colleagues had learnt the lessons of the last major disaster – the 1995 Kobe Earthquake. At that time, the then Tomiichi Murayama Administration had been faulted for a slow, uncoordinated and ineffective response that had needlessly contributed to the death and suffering of some six thousand casualties. This time, the response has been much faster and better coordinated. Nevertheless, the wider extent of destruction compared to Kobe, the relatively remote location of some of the hardest hit rural communities in Japan's northeastern region, the onset of harsh weather conditions, and, especially, the acute challenges of avoiding public panic in the face of the release of radiation have all tested the effectiveness of the government's crisis management skills.

A cursory look at the record of the efforts by past Japanese administrations to handle the nuclear issue helps to explain why any government would find the task of reassuring the Japanese public especially challenging. Public sensitivities are not merely a product of the legacies of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bombings themselves indelibly scarred both cities physically and metaphorically in the public imagination. They also, as a consequence of the inadequate financial, medical and emotional support provided to the individual survivors of the bombing highlighted the shortcomings and responsibilities of

both past United States (US) and Japanese administrations in addressing the needs of the victims of the nuclear attacks.

Similarly, in 1954, a US hydrogen bomb test in south Pacific exposed a Japanese fishing-boat to radioactive fallout – killing one of the crew members and raising widespread public fears in Japan about the risk of radioactive contamination of fish and food supplies in Japan. Cold War alliance priorities appeared to place the national interest ahead of the well-being of individual Japanese citizens and fostered a high-profile anti-nuclear weapons protest movement in Japan that remained active and vocal throughout much of the post-war period.

Nuclear weapons have presented Japan's leaders with especially intractable policy dilemmas. On the one hand, US extended nuclear deterrence has acted as the shield to guarantee Japan's security in the face of, initially, the Soviet strategic threat and, more recently, the challenge from an increasingly more assertive Chinese military and, most worryingly, a de-facto nuclear North Korea armed with ballistic missiles. On the other hand, the Japanese public's aversion to nuclear weapons and the pacifist constraints of Japan's 'peace constitution' have made it difficult for Japanese politicians to openly support a nuclear weapons-based defense strategy.

The solution has been publicly to endorse a high-minded official opposition to nuclear weapons, reflected in the country's so-called 'Three Non-Nuclear Principles'. These were first articulated in 1967, when the government pledged neither to possess, manufacture nor allow the transit of nuclear weapons through Japanese territory. Behind the scenes, however, successive post-war Japanese administrations have covertly accepted the necessity of allowing US governments to station nuclear weapons in Japan (most notably in Okinawa) and have tacitly tolerated the movement of US nuclear weapons through or in close proximity to Japanese territory.


The revelation of such secret agreements has emerged over time as the post-war diplomatic record has been gradually declassified, and has been reinforced by the 2009 decision of Prime Minister Kan's Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government to substantially expand access to once classified official records. This bold move has had a number of important consequences. In a positive sense it has helped to foster a culture of greater transparency and openness in government decision-making. However, opening the public record has also placed strains on alliance relations with the United States, while exposing the inconsistency – some might argue, the hypocrisy – of Japan's past political elites who have been willing to say one thing to the general public while doing the opposite in private in their discussions with the US.

Apart from the debate over nuclear weapons, problems of trust and transparency have also been an issue in the debate over nuclear power. The Japanese public's nuclear allergy has not extended to the civilian nuclear industry. The reason for this is not hard to fathom. As a country with few natural resources, Japan has chosen to turn to nuclear power to compensate for its heavy dependence on external energy supplies, especially its heavy reliance on Middle Eastern oil supplies. As early as the 1950s, the Japanese government, encouraged by vigorous lobbying efforts by both US and British administrations, began to explore the options for acquiring the technology for a home-grown nuclear

industry. The result is that now some 34 percent of Japan's energy needs are provided for by nuclear power and the country has some 53 active nuclear reactors – of varying ages and levels of technical sophistication – dotted throughout the country.

The safety record of the nuclear industry in Japan is a chequered one. In 1995, a sodium leak and fire at the Monju fast-breed reactor in Fukui Prefecture led to the shut-down of the plant. A scandal over an apparent cover-up of the full extent of the damage from the accident, and related legal controversies, delayed the full reactivation of the plant until May of this year. Similar controversies have occurred elsewhere, suggestive of major regulatory shortcomings in the nuclear industry. In September 1999, the Tokaimura plant, north of Tokyo, was the site of a serious accident when three inexperienced workers at the plant mistakenly added a mix of uranium fuel to a reactor. This set off a chain reaction that killed two staff at the plant and exposed local residents to elevated levels of radiation. Similarly, in 2004, a steam and water leak at the Mihama nuclear plant in Fukui killed four workers and injured seven, and once again raised serious questions about the safety record and the accuracy of the technical information provided by Japan's private nuclear contractors.

All of these controversies would be troubling enough when viewed in isolation. Seen in a political context where some of Japan's leaders have acquired, over time, a reputation for providing partial or, in some cases, misleading information on nuclear issues, then it is easy to see why the government has an especially challenging public advocacy problem on its hands. This is not helped by the recent history of a rapid turn-over of Japanese prime ministers – five in as many years since 2006 – that has contributed to declining public confidence in Japan's political leadership and political institutions in general. In some respects, Kan should be well-placed to help project an image of reassurance and openness to the Japanese public. Not only is he the leader of the DPJ, which has taken the lead in shining a light on some of the uncomfortable secrets of the past, but he also came to national prominence early in his political career when, as Minister of Health and Welfare in the mid 1990s he exposed details of a bureaucratic scandal involving the provision of HIV-contaminated blood plasma to Japan's haemophiliacs.

However, political fortunes and reputations are fragile and subject to the unpredictability of events and unforeseen developments. Kan's ability to reassure the public will depend not only on the minute-by-minute response to the crisis at the Fukushima plant, but more fundamentally on the long-term ability to rebuild Japan's damaged infrastructure and fractured local communities. Here, the one unambiguous optimistic sign is the resilience, patience and collective purpose of the Japanese people – who so far have shown a remarkable ability to remain calm in the face of this appalling national tragedy. Paradoxically, Japan's ability to recover from disaster and discover a new sense of national purpose may ultimately come to be based on an acceptance of the limits rather than the strengths of individual national leaders. 

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