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Interview with Dr. Sheila Smith, Council on Foreign Relations

USAPC: As we speak, it has been one month since the earthquake and tsunami hit the Tohoku region of Japan on March 11, causing the gravest crisis this country has faced since World War II. The sheer magnitude of this natural disaster would challenge the governing capacity of most any nation. How is the government of Prime Minister Naoto Kan faring?

Smith: In evaluating the response of the Kan government, I think it's best to compare it to the response of the government of then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama in 1995 to the Kobe earthquake. That makes the most sense in terms of evaluating the government's responsiveness.

Not to be unfair, but you may recall that the government of then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama was not terribly strong, which was very evident following the tragedy in Kobe. Basically, there was a two to three-day period of total confusion and lack of national-local government coordination on disaster response. And the Murayama government said "no thank you" to assistance from the United States even though the US Marines were poised to help.

In contrast, by the evening of March 11 – the earthquake occurred at 2:46 p.m. -- Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) had mobilized and the prefectural governments had communicated their need for immediate assistance. By then, Tokyo also had indicated to Washington that it would be very willing to accept US assistance. So compared to Kobe, it was like night and day in terms of the national government's response.

Admittedly, the scale of devastation in the Tohoku region is completely different from the damage incurred by Kobe. The area affected covers 500 square kilometers of widely distributed communities; Kobe was densely populated. But the 10-meter tsunami wreaked havoc the likes of which were not seen in Kobe.

The human toll of the Tohoku quake says it all to me. There are nearly 30,000 people who are confirmed dead or missing. Most people are assuming that many of the missing were swept away. In Kobe, in comparison, there were only three people missing. So in many ways, the tsunami really has defined this tragedy differently and in human costs, it is far more destructive than the Kobe quake.

The most challenging aspect of this catastrophe, of course, has been management of the nuclear crisis. TEPCO [Tokyo Electric Power Company] is taking a lot of heat, and so it should since it is a regional monopoly with full responsibility for the management of Fukushima Daiichi. Going forward, Japan may reconsider whether it is good to have monopolistic energy suppliers.

The leadership of TEPCO is well educated, and highly respected, so this is not likely to be a case of individual mismanagement. Rather, it is a structural problem. Nearly everyone you speak with in Japan has the same reaction: "This disaster is on a scale way outside the parameters of our planning." In earthquake prone Japan, that seems an unsatisfying response.

Yet, nobody seems to have imagined that the cooling systems would be this badly devastated. Other debates also are important regarding future safety decisions for the nuclear industry. The longstanding debate in the nuclear community about the need for dry cask storage for spent fuel rods, for example, seems to be over. Those who argued that pool storage was safe have now changed their minds.

So globally – not just in Japan – there is a massive reconsideration at the industry level, at the government disaster management level, and at the technical scientific level. Nuclear energy management systems around the globe need to be re-thought because of the crisis in Japan.

Beyond the national response, one piece of the pie that deserves some good analysis and policy improvements in the future concerns the US-Japan alliance. Washington had personnel from the DOE [Department of Energy] and NRC [Nuclear Regulatory Commission] on the ground from the beginning to detect and measure radiation. The US military brought in assets to help manage the nuclear crisis – and the United States did this because Japan is an ally.

Even so, officials in both governments found it difficult to respond to a multiple-dimension crisis for which neither side was prepared. The United States, for example, had to decide how to protect Americans in Japan by establishing evacuation zones different from the Japanese government.

But as Americans on the ground have reported, it was difficult to know what to do because there was no analysis offered to explain the discrepancy. In addition, Americans were urged to get iodine pills, which was an unworkable recommendation because most US ex-pats do not live on military bases where such prescriptions are easy to obtain. So there clearly were some challenges for US consumers of that information.

In addition, it would have been less stressful on bilateral relations if the United States had undertaken its analysis about the implications of the nuclear crisis in a less public way. Should we have held congressional oversight hearings? Absolutely. But in the midst of an ongoing nuclear crisis in which there were radiation leaks and 20-some million people in Japan not knowing what's going to happen, those hearings were part of an active crisis management effort. Could those hearings be held behind closed doors? Probably preferable. In hindsight, we should have been more sensitive to how our public discussion might undermine our ally's ability to manage a serious public safety issues.

The third piece of the policy analysis is international. One of the big lessons from the Tohoku disaster is that we ought to have an international response capacity. A team of global experts comprised of nuclear physicists, government nuclear management professionals, health experts, be they from the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] or another international organization, would allow the global community to contribute to the problem-solving exercise in any future nuclear crisis such as this. We have the history of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. Now we have Fukushima Dai-ichi. There is institutional knowledge that we ought to be taking advantage of.

USAPC: The generally positive reaction in Japan to the US military's "Operation Tomodachi" appears to have further strengthened the foundation of the bilateral security relationship, despite tensions in recent years related to the relocation of US bases on Okinawa.

Smith: Yes. The most impressive demonstration of the closeness of the US-Japan relationship was the fact that our president said immediately upon learning about the disaster that the United States will stand by the people of Japan until they recover. He said that even as US military assets were being deployed. That was a very powerful statement. As someone who carefully watches US-Japan relations, I was deeply grateful for the timing and the framing of our president's message of support.

Without a doubt, our military's capability to mobilize and to turn on a dime proved invaluable. The USS Ronald Reagan quickly shifted missions. In the Pacific Command, US forces knew how to plan and how to anticipate Japan's needs without specifications or requests.

Our military's experience with humanitarian assistance in the Pacific derives from the Indonesian tsunami relief effort in 2004, and other more recent disasters.

The aspect of Operation Tomodachi that many people don't really appreciate concerns the joint operation of US and Japanese forces. In the half-century of the US-Japan security relationship, our forces have engaged in joint exercises, table-top planning exercises, and joint studies, but they have never actually had to operate together because Japan has never been at war. Operation Tomodachi was the first time, for example, that Japanese helicopters landed on US aircraft carriers in actual operations, and that Japanese commanders organized U.S. units in a broad Japan-based operation.

SDF's strength in the post-war period has been largely in the area of disaster relief. Japanese forces are well trained to do this in Japan and beyond. They have engaged in disaster and humanitarian relief missions as well as in UN peacekeeping operations in many countries around the world. The March 11 disaster demonstrated the SDF's capabilities and experience to the Japanese people in a new way.

So Operation Tomodachi enabled an interesting marriage of both the global experience of the SDF and the long-standing contingency planning of the US military and the SDF. While I am glad this was not a war scenario, it nonetheless was a crisis for Japan. Operation Tomodachi served as an incredible testament to the level of dedication on the uniformed sides of both countries.

Beyond that, though, we had this whole-of-government response to helping Japan. The Obama administration formed an interagency task force that brought a broad array of expertise to search and rescue operations, to early humanitarian relief efforts, and to the nuclear crisis. That has been coordinated by the US Ambassador to Japan John Roos in Tokyo and his staff at the embassy, which is another incredible untold story. The US embassy staff has been going 24/7 ever since March 11, despite all of the speculative coverage in the media about the dangers in Tokyo from after-shocks and radiation risk.

Concerning the Okinawa base relocation controversy, many Americans forget that Japan's fiscal situation is as difficult as ours. Japan's debt (amounting to 200 percent of GDP) will be increased due to the post-quake and tsunami rebuilding and recovery will worsen the balance sheet even more. There will be all sorts of short-term measures aimed at ensuring stability in the economy, but the underlying question remains how to get Japan's fiscal house in order. Quite frankly, I don't think Okinawa can be as high on Tokyo's priority list given the devastation in the Tohoku region.

USAPC: You have said that we might see greater tension between Japan's national and local governments, which could undermine their ability to integrate capacities as part of post-crisis response and recovery. Please elaborate further.

Also, what did the April 10 local elections reveal about trends in local versus national politics?

Smith: We have been talking a great deal about Japanese political change for the past 15 years. Over time, the conversation about governance in Japan has been collapsed into discussions about which party is in power and which political leader is aligned with that party.

But underneath that, there have been broader conversations about relations between local government and the national government. There has been an effort by both the DPJ and even the LDP during the 1990s to think through the notion of greater autonomy for local governments, that is to say, allowing the localities to have more voice and more capacity to direct their futures, be it economically or socially. This is quite similar to the debate in the United States about what public policy choices might best be left to state governments.

In Japan, this relationship between local and national government also is being addressed within the context of crisis management. The localities that are devastated have completely lost their governing capacities – literally, the people who populated the local governments are gone as well as the fiscal infrastructure, the support system, the communications systems.

In these small municipalities along the hard-hit coastal areas there effectively is no local government. So the prefectural governments – of Fukushima, Miyagi, Iwate, and Gunma -- have had to assume the primary role in crisis management. Up until recently, the local municipalities went up the bureaucratic chain to obtain welfare benefits, construction permits, and so forth. Now we are seeing an executive-to-executive type of communication. This has allowed a bit more interaction between local and national political leaders.

On April 10, there were local elections in Japan, including 12 gubernatorial races. Interestingly, all of the incumbents won in the governors' races. In addition -- and with some notable exceptions like the Tokyo gubernatorial race -- all of the victorious incumbents enjoyed the support of the DPJ, LDP, and Komeito. The opposition parties more often than not were the Japan Communist Party.

Thus, the national bifurcation of the DPJ and the LDP was not replicated in governors' races, except in some very key areas. What this suggests is that we've become very myopically focused on Japanese politics as the DPJ versus the LDP. We haven't really allowed ourselves to consider whether the conversation in Tokyo has much to do with governance in the rest of the country or not.

My take-away from the elections on April 10 and April 24 is that, no, this conversation about governance has not been in parallel with ambitions at the local level. This *Nagato-cho* habit of thinking that everything gets solved by an election does not appear to be endorsed locally, and especially now that Japan is in the midst of its worst crisis in more than 50 years. Across the board, Japanese governors are talking about sharing responsibility and being adequately prepared to deal with crises if their localities were in the same situation as the four prefectures in the Tohoku region.

Clearly, there will be issues between the affected communities and the national government going forward concerning accountability and financial responsibility. This discussion already has begun in Fukushima, where many people may not be able to return to their home towns. But who is going to pay for repairs, rebuilding, and assume the liability for the nuclear crisis? Moreover, whose preferences will dominate in the design of reconstruction – Tokyo's or the local communities'? This tension will define the effort at reconstruction in the months ahead.

USAPC: The consensus of most Japan-watchers is that there likely will not be national elections in near-term – despite Prime Minister Kan's relatively weak political standing. What factors are influencing this apparent suspension?

Smith: First and foremost, I would say there was broad agreement among Japanese politicians in the wake of the March 11 catastrophe that they must put aside their partisan differences and unite for the common good. But that agreement has eroded somewhat. Japanese voters are not interested in bickering, rather they want solutions. So I wonder if Japan's politicians will risk losing the public's trust by becoming again too indulgent in short-term politicking. Public sentiment will keep the LDP and the DPJ focused on how they can work together to pull Japan out of this crisis, particularly through the summer.

You likely heard that the Japanese Supreme Court ruled earlier this year that the lower house representational system does not fairly allocate seats according to population concentration. It has mandated that the districts be redrawn to more effectively represent the way

in which the Japanese population is dispersed. This, of course, will dissipate the power of the sparsely populated rural districts. Some analysts have suggested that this ruling also will serve to delay the next national election.

I am not sure yet how this will play out. For one thing, the Supreme Court did not dissolve the government by declaring the 2009 lower house elections invalid. This was not like our Florida re-count controversy following the 2004 presidential election. But there is another case on the docket pertaining to upper house elections.

But this need to redistrict based on the recent census will affect the mechanics of the next election. Moreover, the districts devastated by the tsunami will need to cover administrative capacity before a national election can be held. The localities devastated by the tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear crisis lack the capacity to participate in elections, let alone voting records. No one will want to put that kind of pressure on these communities.

We are unlikely to see elections until next year, and thus the most serious political pressures on the prime minister will not come from the electorate but rather from within his own party.

USAPC: In late March, Prime Minister Kan proposed governing via a “Grand Coalition” that would bring LDP members under the DPJ’s ruling umbrella. Do you think Kan was trying to encourage inter-party cooperation in order to facilitate post-crisis recovery, or do you think he has a longer term governing scenario in mind?

Smith: I think Prime Minister Kan made an effort early on in the crisis to invite the LDP into the government. The English press interpreted this offer as the suggestion of a “grand coalition,” but in fact those were not his words. This notion of a “grand coalition” refers back to former DPJ secretary general Ichiro Ozawa’s overture to then prime minister Yasuo Fukuda to form a combined government even before the DPJ came into power. That idea was met with a terrible backlash – both from within and outside of the DPJ. Kan’s approach was different. He offered the LDP key roles in his government so that the two parties could develop common positions from which to cope with the recovery from March 11.

Some analysts have suggested that such bipartisan cooperation would only be possible if LDP chief Sadakazu Tanigaki were given a cabinet post in the Kan government. That is the old model exemplified by former Prime Minister Murayama’s decision in 1995 to join the LDP-led coalition government. I can’t believe the LDP would think that’s a good model because many of its members, particularly the younger generation, view themselves as a resurgent force, not a political party in decline.

If party politics prevent a coalition effort at governing, then perhaps Japan needs a “thinking exercise” that is bipartisan in nature, like the US 9/11 Commission. There are ways to contemplate a new vision for Japan that don’t necessarily involve the old way of thinking that party seats must be traded or cabinet positions awarded. I do hope the crisis is seen as an opportunity for a constructive conversation of policy options and choices. The ruling party will have to take responsibility for those choices, but the expertise and ideas can be from the broader pool of Japanese policy thinkers.

USAPC: In particular, some observers have suggested that the a post-crisis “re-thinking” exercise should address policy change in some heretofore sensitive areas, such as agriculture and the needs of the Japan’s aging society. Reforming the highly protected agricultural sector has proved to be tough in the past. Your thoughts?

Smith: There are a whole range of challenges confronting Japan that are relevant to this crisis – immigration, demography, agriculture reform, fiscal reform. The short-term challenges, quite frankly, will be to get enough temporary housing for displaced people from Tohoku so they won't face next winter without a home. So you have problems with different levels of urgency.

The costs will be formidable as will the time pressure on coming to grips with these issues. Already there are questions about property rights with respect to temporary housing. What land is high enough up so it will be safe on which to build temporary housing? It's not close to water, it's not stable, there are landslide difficulties, and you can't find half of the property owners.

These are the kinds of headaches that will plague reconstruction projects in the months to come. It won't be quick and easy even for matters that seem straightforward, like the construction of temporary housing. There still are a couple hundred thousand displaced people in evacuation shelters. In the midst of these immediate challenges it may be hard to have a focused conversation about broader policy reforms.

But the effort to craft a national vision for reconstruction is beginning. Prime Minister Kan has appointed Makoto Iokibe, professor of Japan's Defense Academy, to lead the National Reconstruction Commission.

Keidanren will be issuing a report this fall that considers Japan's post-crisis future and related policy reforms. Here in Washington, DC, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) also has convened a task force. There are private NGOs that will be delving into how the United States can help. The timeframe for the "thinking" will be the six-month mark, or roughly mid-September.

The one thing we must keep in mind is that Japan's recovery matters not only to Japan, but to the countries of Asia and beyond. It is extraordinarily important to the United States that Japan's recovery be as quick and as complete as possible. Japan's neighbors in Asia also will be deeply affected should there be a delay or weakening of the recovery effort. So it makes sense to consider Japan's recovery as a collaborative project.

Private donations must continue to flow to Japan until people are out of evacuation centers. There needs to be an offering up of whatever policy support the global community can offer. Given the challenging strategic environment in Northeast Asia, this is not a moment for the Japanese people to feel vulnerable. The United States therefore should continue to do all that it can to support – and encourage – the Japanese people as they recover their prosperity and energy.

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