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After the Earthquake: Reinvigorating US-Japan Policy Dialogue BY JAMES GANNON

Shortly before the March 11 earthquake, the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) released a disturbing report chronicling the long-term deterioration of US-Japan policy dialogue and study. Starting from the conviction that a healthy dialogue is needed for a healthy relationship, the report examined the activities of think tanks and other nongovernmental organizations with an impact upon US-Asia policymaking. It concluded that there is a pressing need to reinvigorate the nongovernmental underpinnings of US-Japan bilateral policy dialogue.

James Gannon, Executive Director of the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE), explains that in the aftermath of the devastating March earthquake in Japan, the importance of a concerted effort to reinvigorate US-Japan policy dialogue is of utmost importance.

There is a deep sense that 3/11—as the massive disaster has come to be known in Japan—has fundamentally changed almost everything, including the US-Japan relationship. Nonetheless, the forces driving the erosion of policy dialogue have not faded. Rather, they may have gained momentum. This makes it likely that, without farsighted measures to strengthen policy dialogue and study, bilateral relations will lapse back into the stagnation of recent years.

Our Diminishing Dialogue: This decline in policy dialogue and study is apparent in the level of Japan programming at think tanks active in Washington, D.C. Over the past decade, the number of think tanks in the nation's capital conducting major projects on Japan has dropped by half, from twenty to ten. In comparison, by 2009, more than twice as many had major activities on US-China relations, with more than forty senior experts focusing primarily on China affairs—nearly ten times the number of comparable Japan specialists. Things, of course, are more complicated than just the numbers of projects and staff. Weight also needs to be given to the degree to which country studies are integrated into broader policy discussions, yet on this front as well, Japan-related activities lag far behind those involving America's European allies.

The situation is even grimmer in Japan, where nongovernmental and quasi-governmental foreign policy institutes have grown steadily weaker. The budgets of Japan's five most active and established institutes decreased by almost 40 percent between 1998 and 2008. This is of acute concern at a time when the ruling Democratic Party of Japan has vowed to break with the past by drawing more on policy advice from outside of the bureaucracy.

Political exchanges that bring together legislators from both sides for candid discussions provide another important dialogue channel but these, too, have been waning. By the end of the 2000s, the average number of US Congressional members annually visiting Japan had slipped nearly 75 percent from a decade earlier to just 14, compared with around 50 Congressional members per year going to France and the United Kingdom, and almost 100 to Germany.

Numerous factors have contributed to these trends but the biggest problem has been a deep decline in funding—from private foundations, corporations, and government agencies alike. Just as one example, by 2009, grant making for policy dialogue and study



by the three mid-sized foundations that provide the backbone of support for US-Japan affairs had fallen to just 13 percent of 1995 levels.

Reinvigorating US-Japan Relations: In the face of these disturbing trends, the report urged government and private sector leaders on both sides of the Pacific to launch a serious initiative to reinvigorate policy dialogue by focusing on five elements. It is worth reexamining these in light of what 3/11 has wrought.

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1) Strengthen Institutions, especially in Japan: This disaster has emphatically demonstrated the importance of institutional networks and established patterns of cooperation. The extraordinary outpouring of support for Japan from the United States has been effectively channeled largely because of the institutional ties, trust, and knowledge built up over many years of interactions among policy institutes and other nongovernmental organizations. The need to strengthen policy institutes remains pressing, especially in Japan, but now there is further evidence of the benefits this can yield.

2) Increase and Improve Funding for Nongovernmental Policy Dialogue and Exchange: The report estimated that an additional \$5-\$10 million would be needed annually to bring financial support for the field back to the levels of the mid-1990s. Now, though, the outlook for a revival in funding has dimmed. Some US donors feel tapped out after mobilizing resources for the crisis, while those in Japan are likely to pull back due to the sense that it is more pressing to give to relief efforts. Unsurprisingly, the greatest impact will be felt on the Japanese side, where institutions are already fighting for survival.

3) Create a More Conducive Environment for Policy Dialogue: In addition to avoiding the politicization of policy dialogues, the report urged greater restraint in government budget cutting. Yet, 3/11 is forcing Japan to slash spending even more in order to free up money for post-disaster reconstruction. In the absence of strong political leadership, programs without vocal domestic constituencies are liable to be axed, particularly foreign ministry funding for policy dialogue.

4) Nurture the Next Generation: There is a generational change underway in US-Japan affairs, and the pressing need to empower a new cadre of thinkers and leaders committed to the bilateral relationship is unchanged after 3/11. This remains a high priority considering the significant changes currently underway throughout the Asia-Pacific region and the plethora of joint US and Japanese interests therein.

5) Broaden US-Japan Policy Dialogue beyond Traditional Bilateral Approaches: The close cooperation between the two countries in the immediate aftermath of 3/11 demonstrates just how much more there is to the US-Japan relationship beyond hard security and economics. This underscores the need for greater dialogue on how both countries can work together more effectively on shared global challenges including health, energy, and, yes, disaster relief. In addition, there is also much to be gained by having expanded US-Japan dialogue on these issues as a core element of expanded trilateral, quadrilateral and regional initiatives in which the United States and Japan, together, lead the way.

The impact of 3/11 will be felt for decades, and it is likely to alter the dynamics of the US-Japan relationship. But there is no reason to expect that this tragedy will stem the decline in bilateral policy dialogue and study. For that, what is needed is a targeted investment of resources—and even more importantly leadership—from both sides. What 3/11 provides is a degree of momentum and further rationale for making this investment.

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