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## Extreme Crises *Reassessing U.S. Preparedness after Japan*

POLICY BRIEF



By Patrick M. Cronin and Brian M. Burton

America's response to Japan's crisis has been swift and generous. President Barack Obama pledged personally that America would stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Japan. A civilian Disaster Assistance Response Team deployed to survey the damage. Rescue teams rushed to help save victims trapped in the rubble. U.S. Navy and Air Force personnel and platforms arrived to offer lift and support. American nuclear scientists and officials are assisting with crisis and consequence management at the stricken Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. And the American people have begun to open up their pocketbooks and make charitable contributions. Nonetheless, in helping a staunch ally whose people are reeling in the aftermath of a still-evolving series of disasters, it seems almost impossible to do enough.

Even as the U.S. government rightly remains focused on the immediate and dangerous problems at hand, it is not too soon to raise questions about America's readiness to cope with extreme crises like the one in Japan. Lessons learned from previous

response operations are instructive, but despite the tremendous loss of life in cases like the 2004 Asian tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the compound nature of the present disaster in Japan and the complex international circumstances in which it is occurring should cause policymakers to assess more critically America's preparedness for responding to crises overseas. The combination of extreme natural disaster and extreme industrial disaster in one country – against the backdrop of a wholly different ongoing crisis in North Africa and the Middle East and a major ongoing war in Afghanistan – may change how we think about and prepare for disasters for years to come. The present challenges may appear unique, but they likely provide a window on future challenges that will confront U.S. policymakers.

### **Complex Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Scenarios**

The possibility of a nuclear meltdown quickly eclipsed the formidable but conventional obstacles to rescuing Japanese victims of the earthquake and tsunami. The nuclear danger proves a game-changer for disaster relief. While civilian emergency responders can help monitor populations for contamination in safe areas, they are generally not trained or equipped to operate in environments permeated by chemical, biological and radiological agents. Fear of radiation

geometrically raises the costs of and the barriers to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Unfortunately, such challenges may not prove unique. Before the nuclear incident in Japan, nuclear reactors were on the verge of proliferating across a number of developing countries. There are already more than 440 nuclear reactors in operation, with another 450 or so planned. Next-generation designs may make nuclear meltdowns less likely, but a multitude of older reactors will continue to operate in some four dozen countries.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Japan's nuclear power sector has long been regarded as one of the safest and most advanced in the world, nuclear power-using countries afflicted by similar disasters in the future may not be as sophisticated or secure. Combine that with global trends of urbanization, the proliferation of chemical and biological technologies in industrial processes, the persistent threat of terrorism, and the probability of increasing extreme-weather events due to climate change, and the world may well see disastrous "perfect storms" on a more frequent basis in the future.

The United States may need increased capacity to deploy military units trained and equipped for these kinds of complex disaster scenarios both at home and abroad. Consider that the Department of Defense was still scrambling to send an emergency team to assist Japan with the nuclear disaster one week into the crisis. The Commander of U.S. Pacific Command declared that American forces were ready to operate in the hazard zone around the crippled reactor in support of Japanese Self-Defense Forces,<sup>2</sup> but earlier support missions were hindered by the radiation.

Additionally, more whole-of-government (including federal and local government agencies as well as contractors), whole-of-society (including non-governmental organizations and industry) and combined exercises (including international allies

and partners) are necessary to enhance preparedness for providing the type of disaster relief normally required in the wake of a major natural disaster or conflict under contaminated conditions. Before the United States intervened in Iraq in 2003, for example, it took the unusual step of preparing both military and civilian personnel, within and outside the government, to provide humanitarian aid on a radiological and chemical battlefield.

The Japan disaster should make the United States and its allies rethink how prepared they are for complex contingencies that blur the line between humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, on the one hand, and consequence management (including the restoration of public health and safety and essential governmental services, and the provision of emergency relief in the aftermath of radiological events) on the other. The United States should therefore expand its traditional defense conception of what constitutes a "non-permissive" environment to include natural or man-made disasters involving chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) contamination.

### **Balancing Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief against Other U.S. Military Missions**

Traditionally, the U.S. military has focused on threats emanating from the armed forces of other countries. Yet as the catastrophe in Japan underscores, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, particularly in extreme crises, is a role for which the capabilities of the American military cannot be substituted. While the 9.0 earthquake that induced the sudden tsunami on March 11, 2011 cannot be attributed to climate change, most scientists agree that we can expect a rising incidence of extreme-weather events around the globe because of that trend.<sup>3</sup> The demand for the provision of disaster relief will rise accordingly.

In an age of fiscal austerity, however, the U.S. military will be pressured to pare down its force structure

and operations. The pressure from the institutional services may be to cut humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capabilities and the associated force structure required for such missions in favor of concentrating its resources and operations on more traditional combat missions. Administration officials and Congress should avoid this.

Instead, U.S. policymakers, military planners and Congressional appropriators should recognize overlapping functions that serve both traditional combat and humanitarian missions and emphasize the development of versatile platforms and the maintenance of adequate force structure to respond to more than one significant disaster at a time. Indeed, the capabilities required for complex disasters, including air and sea lift and CBRN detection and response, are arguably more critical for the military than ever for reasons unrelated to humanitarian assistance. Lift is essential for transporting forces to far-off conflict zones. Moreover, in a world characterized by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), we will likely see the use of unconventional weapons or WMDs, which will require U.S. forces to operate in contaminated environments.

### **Coordinating with Other Nations and Organizations**

The Japanese government has needed to rescue victims, provide urgent medical care and temporarily shelter nearly a half million citizens uprooted by this catastrophe. At the same time, the United States, South Korea, China and one hundred other countries have come to offer assistance, creating an immediate need for resilient communications and clear procedures for managing cooperation among such a large, spontaneous coalition forming in the midst of a national emergency. Meanwhile, the specter of nuclear radiation spewing from the stricken Fukushima reactor and drifting toward Tokyo has raised concerns about

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how to handle not just the evacuation of foreign nationals, but also how to handle evacuations over a large urbanized area. Differences of opinion and procedure on evacuations and technical support have marked some aspects of the response, despite the fact that Japan and the United States are among the closest of allies. If these challenges are daunting, imagine how difficult coordination would become during a crisis on the Korean peninsula in which major military forces from several countries are in far closer proximity, the nations involved have more divergent interests and the risk of miscommunication is higher.

Scenarios like that, involving major disasters in strategic regions drawing in participation of several countries and non-state actors with competing interests, highlight the importance of relief exercises with as many potential partners as possible – including rising powers like China and India that might play a larger role in the future. Lastly, the catastrophe that engulfed Japan has also demonstrated the need to promote more effective coordination with players such as nuclear scientists, and representatives of international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency; neither is often involved in disaster relief.

### **Rethinking Management and Resources for an Age of Multiple Crises**

The catastrophe in Japan unfolded against the backdrop of major and violent political upheaval in Libya and across much of the wider Middle East. This may portend an age of more frequent multiple

crises in which a resource-constrained United States will need to make rapid decisions about where to intervene and in what manner.

How can the United States balance multiple crises when its decision-making apparatus and resources are limited? A simple illustration of intersecting crises is that on March 17, 2011 at 3:30 p.m. Eastern Time, the United Nations debated and eventually approved international military intervention in Libya while the president delivered a speech at the White House to redouble U.S. support to help Japan. In the same week, General David Petraeus told Congress that U.S. forces were needed in Afghanistan for the long-term and expressed concern over insufficient funding for State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs in that country.<sup>4</sup>

U.S. policymakers have not sufficiently considered the impact of limited finances and stretched military capabilities on crisis response in a systematic way, or planned for crises that strike in such quick succession. Policymakers have always been ultra-busy managing chronic disasters, but usually they have been able to triage them, making one the top priority and leaving other issues to be addressed later or at a lower level within the ranks of U.S. government agencies. However, one could imagine a scenario in which a large Asian earthquake and tsunami occurs against the backdrop of a mass killing in North Africa (Libya or Sudan perhaps) and another earthquake in Haiti roughly simultaneously. The demand for intervention would be strong and their combined potential to overwhelm leadership, resources, and the capacity to deal with them all would be significant.

Ultimately, the decision is between increasing resources available for different types of crisis response or maintaining the discipline to focus on a smaller subset of crises. On a practical level, this may entail limiting U.S. actions to those that

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the United States is uniquely suited to provide (for instance, air and sea lift, or intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) while encouraging allies and partners to play the leading role in other areas. Regardless of the scale or intensity of a crisis, or how many crises are going on at once, a central requirement of effective leadership within the U.S. government will be to maintain the ability to triage and clearly assess U.S. interests and priorities across the range of crises. For example, the United States may well have been hindered in its ability to respond in a robust fashion to the crisis facing its critical ally Japan had it devoted more significant resources to military or humanitarian support in Libya early on. Accordingly, policymakers must think through the opportunity costs of action in response to events that could be considered more peripheral on the scale of U.S. interests.

Though multiple crises are likely to be so extreme that certain aspects of them can only be handled by the military, civilian preparedness appears to be in most obvious need of greater capacity. The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review emphasized a critical need to be prepared for a range of simultaneous scenarios involving stabilization and reconstruction abroad and disaster relief either at home or overseas.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, civilian national security planners, both at the White House and in agencies like State, USAID and Homeland Security, also need to be prepared to manage multiple, simultaneous complex crises, particularly major disaster scenarios that occur without

warning and require rapid-response U.S. support to allies. Responding to such disasters is rarely optional in the view of policymakers.

To that end, U.S. civilian agencies need to develop a capabilities-sizing metric for measuring their own capacity to handle surges and multiple contingencies.<sup>6</sup> This component was notably missing from the State and USAID-led Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, which seemed to view disaster response as a relatively straightforward problem that could be led by USAID.<sup>7</sup> The experience of Japan suggests that much higher-level coordination and resources are necessary for these types of operations.

### Conclusion

The Japan disaster has highlighted a potentially catastrophic, multi-dimensional crisis against the backdrop of other national security crises and operations. At a minimum, the United States needs to reassess its real readiness to cope with multiple crises. Surely few assessments would find that the United States is ready for some combination of 9/11-type terrorist strikes or major earthquake, a Fukushima nuclear disaster and an international security crisis abroad. Future requirements for major contingencies are likely to include aiding people in contaminated non-permissive zones, coping with multiple complex crises, establishing immediate communications with allies and the host nation, and maintaining sufficient military bandwidth for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions.

Clearly there are limits to how much the United States should do to prepare for what seem like rare, “worst-case” scenarios. Maximizing capabilities for extreme crises may not be a good return on investment given all the other needs of the country. Careful analysis and tradeoffs will be required in the months and years ahead.

As Japan and the world rebuild from disaster, a thorough reassessment of how the United States manages multiple and extreme crises will be essential for how we cope the next time around. While the United States government prepares to delve into these and other and related critical issues, all Americans can ponder how to emulate the Japanese cool-headedness under pressure, if and when we face multiple disasters.

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## ENDNOTES

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Officials clad in protective gear scan a man for radiation at a temporary scanning center for residents living close to the quake-damaged Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant March 16, 2011, in Koriyama, Fukushima Prefecture, Japan.

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