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Japan in the International Community, My View

**Fukushima crisis and dented Japan
in the International community:
My view**

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Japan enjoys an enviable reputation and respect in the international community in many ways. A responsible and committed member of the world community, Japan has earned a remarkable stake in global affairs through its soft power of diplomacy. After its resurrection from the debris of the World War II, the country renounced the path of war and has established its identity as a peace-loving nation exerting leadership in global peace and security. Economically the country achieved enormous strides in commerce and trade during the 1960's and 1970's and emerged as the second biggest economic giant in the world. With its distinct culture, unique language, work-ethics, Japan climbed the ladder of development presenting itself as a role model for development in Asia and inspired some countries to pursue 'Look East Policy', a growth model recapitulated after Japan. Again, with its aid package through ODA policy and contributing participation as a development partner, the country exerts enormous good will and influence across the globe. In terms of cultural diplomacy, Japan is perceived as a contributing member in world peace and a global leader in the arena of science and technological development. Lately, the economic power has suffered decline and the recent Fukushima crisis added a new dimension denting the global image of the country. This essay is intended to draw upon as assessment on how Japan's image in the world polity suffered a setback in the face of Fukushima crisis based on my personal observation and experiences during the one year stay in Japan.

Japan has undoubtedly showed pioneering leadership in scientific development and technological innovation and people globally held confidence in Japanese capability in the promotion of scientific research and technology. To this is added Japan's identity as a development partner of the developing world. The country's diplomacy has successfully projected the technology-driven society and developed economy and earned the recognition of global leader in world affairs. Much of the reputation has dented in the handling of the Fukushima daiichy crisis resulting from the biggest earthquake accompanying the Tsunami. It has been alleged that Japan has been unable to live up the expectation level with regard to the handling of the nuclear crisis and the control of radiation from the reactors. The allegation also includes the level of efficiency and transparency in dealing with the crisis. Adequacy in safety measures and access to information to the world have also been called in question. Global civil society has, however, eyed the management of the crisis from the humanitarian perspective. This results in a damage or dent to Japan's global image in leadership calling in question the capability and efficiency of Japan in the management of disaster.

An objective evaluation of the handling the nuclear crisis and its impact on the international community deserves a closer discussion. The Fukushima nuclear plant maintained by TEPCO to generate electricity in Tokyo and its vicinity was badly shaken by the Tsunami triggered by the 9.0 Richter earthquakes, an incident unprecedented in Japan's history leading to several nuclear reactors disarray and leakage of radiation across the area and beyond. Nobody questioned the incidence itself, but the developments that followed the handling of the crisis, did raise some queries among nuclear experts and humanitarian activists around the globe.

The global community was concerned about a possible nuclear disaster engulfing Japan and beyond as painted by electronic media. No doubt, the international community wanted to see a transparency over the dealing of the issue. The government of Japan, governed by a sense of pride and self-esteem over technological sophistication, allegedly showed initially a cold shoulder towards proposals of cooperation and assistance from the West. This gave a wrong signal to the international community questioning Japan's egotism and self-esteem.

Handling the crisis showed a remarkable difference in approach. Experts from the USA and Europe differed in the way Japan was dealing with the crisis. Japan's

alleged unwelcoming attitude towards proposals of cooperation and assistance from the friendly states immediately after the crisis helped take shape such perception. Some nuclear experts even complained that Japan was hiding information from reaching public regarding the degree and dimension of the crisis. To this is added the view from the human rights perspective that adequate safety measures were not taken with regard to the security of the workers in the power plant. The rift was also obvious in declaring the safety zone for the radiation area between Japan and its western allies including the USA, France, and Germany etc. Openly Korea criticized Japan's handling of the issue as incompetent. Given the depth and dimensions of the perception pertaining to the issue, Japan was misperceived as an egoistic and proud nation.

While there is a fusion between fact and phantasy in the claim, one needs to unearth the myth in order to have a sound grasp of the issue. Given the transparent image of the country, the question now arises: Is Japan bad at communications? or why were they not loud and clear in its deliberations to the public? One possible reason underlines the cultural perspective: By nature, Japanese are soft and indirect in communications i.e. their complex deliberations partly give reasons to their ineffective communications. The critics of Japanese society and culture point to the traditional allegation that the Japanese culture remains inapprehensible to foreigners. The other explanation pertained to the language barrier. The Japanese society is inaccessible to a non-native expatriate in Japan to the extent that one can hardly have easy movement in the countryside without the knowledge in Japanese language. This language barrier was partly responsible for failure to bring in the intended outcome, i.e. the expatriates could hardly grasp explanation or developments taking shape in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. As a result, the foreigners had to rely on the international media rather than the first-hand information from the host government. As an expatriate, despite being well-conversant in English, I was acutely faced with this complication owing to local language barrier during the critical days of the disaster and felt helpless regarding accurate information and easy movement inside Japan.

Regarding the initial Japanese aversion to global cooperation to mitigate the nuclear disaster, I feel tempted to endorse the views of the diplomats in Japan. The diplomatic circle in Tokyo believes that the govt. of Japan was late and dillydallying to respond to the call for assistance from the USA and Europe to handle/tackle the reactor leakage leading to the worsening of the situations in Fukushima power plants. Whether the criticism is incorrect or whether it carries a significant substance of facts, the perception or view affects denting Japan's image to a great extent. Not only a number of embassies including France, Germany and USA shifted their locations from Tokyo to elsewhere in Osaka or Hiroshima, the decision itself helped mould the public perception negatively with regard to the level of the safety and security in Tokyo arising out of the radiation contamination and the stance of the Japanese government taken to this end. Though embassies are sovereign entities with the mandate of deciding their own regarding security and safety of its institution as well as nationals and the host government is not in position to press decisions on them, the decision reflected the rift in view points with regard to safety and security held by the host government and the foreign governments represented in Japan. This action by the diplomatic community left loud message to the world.

There was other side of the story. As against the picture mentioned above, there was a quite different picture prevailing. It was seen that the expatriate community living in Japan decided to completely go by the decision of the host government. These people kept unflinching confidence in the government initiatives taken to tackle the crisis and appreciated the courage, patience and fortitude with which the Japanese people faced the crisis. As a diplomat by profession currently pursuing a Post-graduation in Japan, I experienced such an incident. I was surprised by the level of confidence and emotional attachment to the Japanese management by the expatriate Bangladeshis as they were pressing home the idea to the Bangladeshi authority not to move the embassy to the other part of Japan and to play bigger role and extend cooperation to the Japanese authority. Again, the element of surprise I was confronted with in the handling nuclear disaster is the stoicism with which the Japanese people faced. In this regard, the speech by the Emperor and the Prime Minister had overpowering impact upon the mass people who went by the measures taken by the govt. and helped in overcoming the crisis. The world could see, with awe and wonder, the national unity and ethos of Japanese nation that they can walk tall amid disasters with their spirit unshaken.

A discussion on handling the Fukushima crisis would remain incomplete without discussing the role of the electronic media. The global media like CNN and BBC had access to and they were broadcasting live programs from Fukushima. It was observed that the media reports, markedly different from local deliberations, were speculative and biased on radiation and possible meltdown

of the nuclear reactors which some labeled as hostile and interest-seeking. However, the way CNN or BBC was broadcasting news, created much confusion and misunderstanding among foreigners, to some's view, with malice and propaganda. The fallout effect of news broadcast regarding the immediacy of the meltdown of the reactor and the spread of the radiation generated by the media was enormous. Careful observers might have noticed that some western electronic media were engaged in negatively projecting Japan, partly in continuation of the "Japan bashing" in the USA and Europe which took their roots in the delayed recall of Toyota cars from around the world markets.

When problems are identified, it is possible to seek for remedies. Then what efforts could Japan take to paint the dent in its image triggered by Fukushima disaster? Japan should continue to keep up its good efforts as a committed partner of development of the developing world and responsible contributing member of the international society. This will help sustain and maintain Japan's global leadership in world affairs. It is to be noted that the world polity has confidence in Japan's capability and stake in global affairs and Japan should grid up its loins to shoulder this responsibility as the country has the means and resources to provide capable leadership. As attainment of global leadership requires promotion of a global language, to cope with the change and pace of globalization, Japan should revisit its language policy and put accent on promoting English as second language. This would not only help Japan to win over global market, but to attain harmony and togetherness with the pace of the global society. The country may also take steps to strengthen the media and communication sectors to remain at par with the Western media. In international politics, Japan's soft-power diplomacy as a means to increase its global visibility and presence will continue to bring in fruition. Japan could pursue the policy advocated by former Foreign Minister Takeo Fukuda, pioneer of Japan Foundation: Japan should now seek its own prosperity in the prosperity of the world, and the whole nation must be conscious of this goal. As long as Japan would continue to make more contribution to the development of the poorer nations and will open up culturally and intellectually to the international community, the country will win the hearts and minds of the global community. With regard to Fukushima crisis, I strongly believe Japan would be able to gradually overcome the crisis and rebuild its economy by virtue of its national unity and spirit as the economy is endowed with an inherent capacity and will to reassert itself from the bottom of crisis.