

Fourth Anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake Where We Are & Where We Are Heading

By Kazumasa Kusaka

March 11 marked the fourth anniversary of a disaster that destroyed large areas of northeastern Japan, with tsunami wiping out entire villages. But March this year also saw the resumption of highway and local train services along the Pacific coast, and this was visible and encouraging news from the region.

I was a member of the Emergency Center within the Cabinet, in charge of the energy area after the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake disaster in 1995 and was also involved in the reconstruction plans. The first five years aimed at restoration and the latter five at recovery. The year following that quake, a Quadrilateral Trade Ministers Meeting was held in Kobe to send out the message that Kobe was standing again. Although the Port of Kobe had lost its dominant status in northeast Asia, because the damage was limited to a fairly small area the region soon bounced back. Learning from that calamity, a disaster medical assistance team (DMAT) was later established in each prefecture.

However, as the saying goes, "Generals always fight the last war" and the next disaster takes quite different shape. This time in northeast Japan, villages were simply wiped out by tsunami and there was little left that a DMAT could help with. In March this year the United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction Conference held in Sendai discussed ways in which the international community can share rescue and relief resources in a timely manner and learn from the multifaceted nature of disasters.

In the Tohoku region of northeastern Japan, the areas downwind of the Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power plant are still suffering lingering damage. Other nuclear power plants facing the Pacific Ocean survived safely, though at the Dai-Ichi plant it had never been imagined that a tsunami could submerge the emergency power systems.

This region no less than other rural communities has been suffering from depopulation. Therefore simple restoration cannot provide sustainable solutions in the local medical and transportation systems. The region is the frontrunner in the greying of the population and poses a test for Japan. Top-flight architects are said to design their work to be in harmony with existing surroundings realized through history and culture, exercising self-restraint with regard to their own ego. A similar approach is needed here.

Most big Asian cities have outgrown their original planning because of unintended inflows of rural residents. In Japan, a plan for remodeling the Japanese archipelago under the leadership and creativity of Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka in the 1970s was introduced to create job opportunities in rural areas to counter

migration or work-away-from-home during the agricultural off-season. Measures to squeeze factories out of the big cities were also introduced to mitigate their excessive concentration and pollution.

With the Tanaka Plan in mind, the question now is whether reconstruction will lead to investment in the Tohoku region's sustainable future with the participation of the rest of Japan, beyond the creation of public works jobs as an adrenaline shot in the arm. The good news is that several enterprises have decided to invest in the region, such as renewable energy and R&D centers.

It has taken four years for Japan to face reality and begin to shape its future energy and environmental plans in pursuit of the best mix, and as a logical consequence its global warming policy target. Here again, we should not just return to the trend before the disaster, but aim for a resilient, safer and more diversified demand-supply structure. As regards nuclear power, the state-of-art plants are quite different from the Fukushima reactors designed in the 1960s. The United States, France and Japan have been active in R&D on fourth generation reactors resistant to accidents, and also against nuclear proliferation. We are being tested whether we have the will and wisdom to learn from our failures and to prepare for the future.

In the economic field, the unprecedented experiment of Abenomics to enhance the multiplier effects of traditional macro and micro policy tools by working on mindsets to counter negative thinking about deflation continues and expectations remain high. Japanese historical evidence and mentality show that when a clear national target is shared, we can display a great ability to achieve it.

Recently we were eager to show a reborn Kobe, and before that in 1964 at the Olympic Games we aspired to demonstrate that Japan was back as a member of the OECD and GATT, rising from the ashes from World War II and contributing to global prosperity as a peaceful nation. This time at the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, we share an aspiration to show that we are a frontrunner in tackling the challenges posed by a rapidly aging society with fewer children, having succeeded in exiting from the deflationary lost two decades.

The last four years have been a period for these emerging thoughts to mature.

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