

Interview with Yoichi Funabashi, Chairman of Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation

Restoration of Liberalism & Promotion of Cooperation to Encourage Globalization — Commitment by Think Tank Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation

By *Japan SPOTLIGHT*

Japanese think tanks are emerging as a mechanism for promoting democracy today. The Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation (RJIF), founded on Sept. 20, 2011 by Yoichi Funabashi, former editor-in-chief of the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of the largest newspaper companies in Japan, demonstrates the emerging role of think tanks in Japanese democracy. He immediately oversaw RJIF's "Independent Investigation Commission on the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident" (2011), which was ranked 24th in the world among think tank policy reports in the *2012 Global Go-To Think Tank Ranking*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP), and was the highest-ranking entry from Japan. In an interview with *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, the founder of RJIF discussed its origins, achievements, operations and future plans.

(Interviewed on April 17, 2017)

Motivation for Founding a New Think Tank

JS: The RJIF has just celebrated its fifth anniversary. Could you tell us what made you decide to establish this think tank?

Funabashi: On March 11, 2011, the crisis at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima began in the immediate wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. I wondered greatly at that time why we could not prevent it. I thought that an independent private institute, and not just the government, would need to organize research into the causes of this incident. At the end of April in 2011, in the airport lounge on my way to Washington D.C., I happened to meet Nobumasa Akiyama, then associate professor of Hitotsubashi University and an international political scientist working on energy security. In our conversation, we agreed on the need to start up a private research group to examine the causes of this nuclear power plant crisis, and later decided to found a think tank.

After my return to Japan early in May, I arranged a meeting of four or five friends of mine to discuss this project. Each of us invited some experts on specific policy issues like security, energy, and economics, most of them in their thirties or forties, and then finally



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at the end of August we succeeded in having our first meeting of more than 30 members. It was only a gathering of a discussion group and there was not yet any organization of a research institute but we thought it sufficiently urgent to start discussions.

At the same time, my friend Masaakira James Kondo, a social entrepreneur and professor of the graduate school of Hitotsubashi University, and I started fund-raising and inviting leading thinkers in Japan to join our project. Hiroshi Kitazawa, who was then going to retire as chairman of the Japan Science and Technology Agency, decided to join us and our think tank was officially started on Sept. 20, 2011. We then officially started an independent research group to examine the causes of the Fukushima nuclear crisis. Over the next five months we had interviews and meetings with more than 300 people involved in this crisis. This

was the beginning of our project and our activities have now expanded to cover other issues such as those related to foreign policy and security.

We discovered through this project that risk, governance and leadership are the keys to managing a crisis. Assessing risks in advance and managing them, achieving optimal allocation of available resources and utilizing them most effectively, and firm

leadership to enable risk management and governance to work well are all essential. Our research is all done from these three perspectives and we have covered not only the Fukushima crisis but also such issues as “Why did the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government collapse after only three years and three months?” or “How can we cope with depopulation?” All these issues are examined from the perspective of a crisis of governance first and then the lack of risk assessment and management combined with lack of leadership.

Achievements of the RJIF

JS: What has been your most important achievement so far? For example, on the question of the crisis of governance that you mentioned, how did you conclude it could be avoided?

Funabashi: Let me talk about our research into the cause of the nuclear power plant crisis. We assume that the system for promoting nuclear power stations was based on the belief that a nuclear power plant must always be safe. To promote this, the government thought it would be necessary to show the nation in its assessments that risks have been minimized as much as possible to allay public concerns. For example, it was recommended to keep an emergency electricity generation system in a storage room in the basement out of public view so that people would not feel anxious about possible cases of emergency. In emergency evacuation drills for a Station Blackout (SBO), it was recommended to do them assuming only a snow disaster and not a case of an earthquake and subsequent tsunami, as the latter could frighten people too much. If you think only about limited risks and stop thinking about other possible risks, you will only be ready for those limited risks. In the case of Fukushima, thinking about all other possible risks and trying to be well prepared for them was considered to provoke unnecessary concerns.

So we found there was a cause for this crisis in such a system that sacrifices overall security in order to gain a little peace of mind. To reform it, we need an independent organization in charge of security assessments for nuclear power stations apart from one that promotes them. It is also necessary to share the most updated key findings and lessons with the rest of the world to promote the safety of nuclear power plants. To assess risks and try to be prepared for them based on our own Japanese standards is the wrong approach.

Another issue we discussed in our research was how to promote nuclear power by business and government cooperation and work

sharing. In the case of natural disasters, there would be government involvement in business restoration operations, assuming that private companies could not carry the whole burden and cost by themselves. In order to promote the nuclear power business from now on, we conclude that it will be necessary for the government to be directly involved in it to be well prepared for a wide range of risks. I believe that our project has made a contribution to our national policy on nuclear power by pointing out these specific issues and creating venues where all nations can join the discussions.

We also showed the nation that an independent think tank can play the role of watchdog, clarifying the accountability of the government surveillance organization working in accordance with the safety regulations.

Responding to International Geopolitical Risks

JS: You have been working on other issues such as international political situations. What outcomes have you seen?

Funabashi: Since setting up our think tank, the territorial dispute between China and Japan has been drawing attention and China's excessively aggressive foreign policy has been significant. I seriously thought at that time that we were getting into an era of geopolitics and started writing a series of articles titled “New World Geopolitics” in July 2011 for the Japanese monthly magazine *Bungeishunju*. Since the global financial crisis of 2008 and the rapid collapse of the global regime led by the developed Western nations, we have been entering more into the age of the G20 ruling over a “New World”. I thought this would deserve being examined by our think tank, as my expertise was originally in geopolitics. So after our project on the Fukushima crisis was finished, we organized the “Japan-US Military Statesmen Forum” as our new flagship project. We invited former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as former chiefs who had just retired, and also the current chairman and chiefs, to join this forum to discuss strategic responses to the critical situations in the South China Sea, East China Sea and the Korean Peninsula, where geopolitical risks have been rising significantly. In addition, we discuss in this forum cybersecurity issues and space strategy. We believe that this program will strengthen the US-Japan alliance and contribute to the enhanced security of Japan by involving military personnel.

We believe that our audience is the nation and thus to meet their needs we make it a rule to publish all of our outcomes in

publications for sale. We also publish them in English as well in order to get feedback from global readers, though it is costly.

JS: Who is working on research at the RJIF?

Funabashi: Yoichi Kato, former chief of the US Bureau of the *Asahi Shimbun* and an expert on national security, has been working with us in charge of national security and geopolitical issues as principal researcher since January 2016. Another principal researcher, Kay Kitazawa, who used to work as a staff director for our project on Fukushima, is now working for us on the issue of “risk, governance and leadership”. Martin Fackler, former chief of the Tokyo bureau of the *New York Times*, is now our research fellow and project director on the project called “Why Japan Matters” aimed at redefining the role and mission of Japan in the world.

JS: It is often pointed out that there is a growing income gap between the rich and the poor, and that poor people’s discontent with the wealthy leaders and those in charge of current administrations all over the world lies behind the rise of geopolitical risks. Some might consider the latest US presidential election an example of this cause and effect relation between the two. What do you think about it?

Funabashi: We have published a book, whose title can be translated as “Are Postwar Conservative Politics Over?” (Shueisha, 2015), in which we examined the rise of nationalism in Japan as a risk for Japanese politics, and we will continue to study this issue from now on. Liberal values like human rights or constitutionalism must be reconfirmed in this context. In accordance with these values, we will need to achieve a balance of power or reconciliation based upon deep discussions in a society with growing diversity today, since liberalism assumes tolerance of different values and opinions and urges us to compromise. Any violence or excessively aggressive language against political opposition groups would narrow the path for compromise. Liberalism may seem as if it tends towards social instability as it is always seeking coalitions, but this would lead to tolerance of diversity eventually.

JS: Immigration is a big issue in the US and Europe in thinking about income gaps. This can have the effect of eroding the spirit of tolerance. In Japan, since we have very few immigrants, this risk is not so high, is it?

Funabashi: Yes, it is certainly true that there are lower risks related to the spirit of intolerance in Japan than in the US or Europe on this point. But this is due not just to the much lower number of immigrants, but also to the lower income gap. The current Japanese administration is trying to maintain the welfare state and not to become a “small government” by cutting social welfare expenditure. Though the income gap between the rich and the poor in Japan is increasing, it is smaller than the average among OECD nations.

On political equality, the value of one vote in one region being twice or four times as big as that in another region was concluded to be in a state of unconstitutionality by our Supreme Court. This puts young people in cities with high population density at a disadvantage. However, this works in favor of blue color workers in their fifties with only a high school education who might possibly be most influenced by nationalism, since most of them live and vote in areas with a higher value for a single vote. This could be working as a safety valve for Japanese society. It is also to be noted that we do not hold national referendums except on the occasion of Constitutional amendments.

It is certainly true that there is growing concern about political intolerance or extremism in the world, but the current Japanese administration is working well to achieve political stability by absorbing diversified views.

Growing Importance of Asia in World Political Economy

JS: On the topic of international political economy, Asia seems to be becoming a region playing a key role in global governance. What do you think?

Funabashi: As current political situations in Asia continue, there is a growing risk of the collapse of Asian regional economic integration, open regionalism and even the global free trade system. One critical issue is Chinese military aggression in the South China Sea. China is trying to force each ASEAN member country to accept its foreign policy position in the South China Sea in exchange for concessions in international trade. This will make it difficult for ASEAN countries to achieve economic integration. At the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh in 2016, they tried to issue a statement condemning China for its aggression in the South China Sea, but could not do so due to the objections of Cambodia and Laos, both of which are recipients of large amounts of aid from China. This is something that happens often, and ASEAN countries are now in a more critical situation, at a time when they are going to celebrate

their 50th anniversary.

Then President Donald Trump came onto this political scene where Chinese political influence is dominant, and said that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral regional free trade agreement, would be useless. This is a dangerous sign for Japan's foreign policy in Asia. We face the challenge of the immediate need to create an order in the Asia-Pacific region that includes India and Australia without the United States. This is a historic opportunity but at the same time a great challenge, and it will be crucial to share this perception with other Asian countries. More importantly, this perception sharing must be achieved not only among governments but also among business people, academics and the media. We, at the RJIF, will be working on how to achieve this.

JS: There is a view that promoting the TPP without the US or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) would be effective in changing US trade policy, since US industries would be disadvantaged by being outside such regional trade agreements. Do you think Asian countries should play a leadership role in concluding these regional arrangements in the interest of global free trade?

Funabashi: First of all, Vietnam and Malaysia are not ready to promote the TPP without the US, because they were once engaged in TPP negotiations in order to enter into the US market and they would not find any incentive to conclude it without US participation. Can Japan provide them with any other incentive instead of the US? Maybe not. Japan would have to be prepared for further concessions in order to attract those nations to negotiations. Japanese leadership in concluding the TPP without the US among Asian countries would be tested, if such negotiations were started.

The RCEP is another Asia-wide regional FTA in which China is taking part as a negotiating member. This is a much less ambitious FTA in terms of trade liberalization than the TPP, and thus we cannot expect to gain the benefits of trade liberalization that could encourage structural reform to enhance the growth potential not only of Japan but also of China.

Aside from these regional trade regime arguments, we need to change our relationship with China from one of sheer confrontation to one with in-depth dialogue on policy issues and common foreign policy objectives. This is a truly challenging subject, but one deserving of study and examination.

How to Cope with an Aging Society

JS: On the question of our aging society, do you think that gradually accepting higher levels of immigration would be good for Japan in terms of creating greater diversity in society, or coping with depopulation, a long-term trend in our economy?

Funabashi: I think it would be good for maintaining our national economic power basically, though of course it would be good for creating diversity as well. We need to maintain the vitality of the whole society despite depopulation. To maintain population growth, apart from immigration, we basically need to have an overall social system supporting child care and raising children based upon a commitment to population growth. To achieve a consensus on this, our role as a think tank is significant.

On the question of immigrants, we will need them in the long run to deepen our relations with Asian countries as well. We have a mission to create new relations with Asia and accepting immigrants from these countries, gradually and with caution, is one of the options to achieve this goal, I believe. This could bring diversity to our society and play a pivotal role in stimulating innovation.

Conclusion

JS: Finally, could you tell us what discussions were held at your fifth anniversary gathering by the various thinkers who attended from around the world?

Funabashi: We talked about how to protect democracy and liberalism under rising geopolitical risks and nationalism. We are now facing a challenge to an international order based upon respect for human rights, rules-based governance and peaceful solutions by utilizing diplomacy in international conflicts without resorting to military force. All the panelists and discussants agreed on the need to maintain this order by intelligent thought and knowledge and to expand the role of think tanks in this regard.

We also agreed on the need of joint international work and research among think tanks to achieve this goal, and also to publish our opinions directly for the public through the media. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who is a freelance writer.