

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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Operation Tomodachi in Miyagi Prefecture: Success and Homework¹

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On March 11, 2011, at 2:46 p.m., a 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck off the east coast of Miyagi Prefecture and generated a tsunami that advanced more than three miles inland from the seashore. The tsunami damaged 500 miles of seashore on the east coast of Honshu, and as of early December, 15,841 people died, 3,493 are still missing, and 353,676 houses were completely or partially destroyed.² The total damage is estimated at more than 20 trillion yen (\$256 billion dollars).

President Barack Obama of the United States spoke to Prime Minister Naoto Kan of Japan by phone on March 11 and offered to provide whatever assistance Japan needed. Gen. Ryoichi Oriki, chief of staff of the Joint Staff, Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), called Lt. Gen. Burton Field, commander of U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) and the 5th Air Force, on the evening of March 11 to request cooperation and support. The U.S. Joint Support Force was soon established at Yokota Base under the command of Adm. Patrick Walsh, U.S. Pacific Fleet commander, and “Operation Tomodachi” (friend in Japanese) was launched by the order of U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM). The JSDF and USFJ/USPACOM³ have had a long history of joint exercises since the late 1970s, but Operation Tomodachi was the first “joint operation in the field.” Operation Tomodachi became “the single largest humanitarian relief effort in American history”⁴: 24,538 personnel; 24 ships, including two aircraft carriers, the USS *Ronald Reagan* and USS *George Washington*; 189 aircraft; and 122 vehicles participated in the operation.⁵ This operation was remarkably successful but also yielded lessons for alliance cooperation and Japan’s crisis management.

Recovery of Sendai International Airport

USFJ/USPACOM provided logistical support and conducted humanitarian assistance/disaster relief activities under Operation Tomodachi. One of the highlights was the rehabilitation of Sendai International Airport. Located less than one mile from the seashore, the airport was damaged by the tsunami with more than 1,000 cars, trees, houses, and small planes strewn about. The airport was covered with 300,000 cubic meters of debris, and the runway was covered with mud as much as two inches thick.⁶ The USFJ decided to recover Sendai airport as their hub, and the rehabilitation of the airport later became a symbol of the success of Operation Tomodachi.

The maintenance of airports is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism (MLIT), and the Maeda Road Construction Company, responsible for maintaining the runway at Sendai airport, was expected to lead the cleanup effort. But by March 14, MLIT decided to accept the support of USFJ/USPACOM. Half of the 3,000-meter runway was not damaged seriously and was cleaned up by Maeda Road Construction within a day.

¹ The 3.11 Great East Japan Earthquake caused tremendous damage to three prefectures in Tohoku: Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima. In this essay, I focus mainly on Operation Tomodachi in Miyagi Prefecture and do not discuss the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear radiation issue. I conducted research in Sendai twice and visited USFJ headquarters twice. I would like to sincerely thank Timothy Curry, Scott Jerabek, Masatoshi Kitahara, Michio Kayaba, Hiroyuki Komatsu, Isao Ito, Makoto Nagai, and Patrick Stackpole for their insightful comments. The views expressed are my own.

² National Policy Agency, as of December 8, 2011.

³ Most of the U.S. forces stationed in Japan are under the operational control of U.S. Pacific Command.

⁴ U.S. vice president Joe Biden’s speech at Sendai airport on August 23, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/23/remarks-vice-president-biden-sendai-airport>.

⁵ According to USFJ Headquarters.

⁶ Isao Ito, “Sendai Kūkō Tāminaru no Fukkyū Kōji no Gaiyō in tsuite” [Outline of Damage Repair of Sendai Airport Terminal], *Gekkan Kensetsu* 55, no. 11 (November 2011): 43–46.

On the morning of March 16, the U.S. military delivered forklifts, bulldozers, and other heavy equipment, and the first MC-130 landed that afternoon with relief supplies.

A maximum of 260 U.S. military personnel from Okinawa, Camp Fuji in Shizuoka, and Camp Zama in Kanagawa camped out in the parking lot of the airport, or in the terminal building in their sleeping bags, and the airport was called “Camp Sendai.” They worked to clean up the airport with 230 Japanese civilian workers of Maeda Road Construction on 24-hour schedules from March 19 to April 4. Sendai airport reopened for military flights on March 28, and the first commercial flights from both Osaka and Tokyo arrived on April 13.

Other Activities under Operation Tomodachi

USFJ/USPACOM provided various forms of support under Operation Tomodachi. Other major activities in Miyagi Prefecture were as follows:

- **Massive search and rescue operation:** USFJ/USPACOM participated in search and rescue operations along the 370-mile coastline of Tohoku for three days, from April 1 to 3, in collaboration with the JSDF, the Japan Coast Guard, and police and fire authorities.
- **Logistics support and port clearance operation on Oshima Island:** Oshima Island is located off shore from Kesenuma at the northern edge of Miyagi Prefecture, and all lifelines to the island, including the supply of food, water, electricity, and gas, stopped on March 11. On March 27, sailors and marines from the Essex Amphibious Readiness Group, capable of moving heavy equipment without the use of a harbor, supported the transport of relief supplies, as well as vehicles and trucks; electricity was restored by that evening. Three hundred sailors and marines from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit also cleaned up debris in three ports, Uranohama, Yogai, and Komagata, in Oshima from April 1 to 6.
- **Operation Field Day:** Many schools near the seashore were damaged by the tsunami and filled with mud and debris. At the request of local governments, including the Ishinomaki municipal government, U.S. service members participated in the cleanup of schools under “Operation Field Day” from March 30 to April 18. They removed mud and debris and mopped the floor of school buildings and gymnasiums together with teachers and parents.
- **Operation Soul Train:** Nobiru Station on East Japan Railway’s Senseki Line in Higashi Matsushima is located a half mile away from the seashore. Under “Operation Soul Train,” 40 soldiers of U.S. Army Japan and I Corps (forward) together with 16 Ground Self-Defense Force personnel worked to clean up the station from April 21 to 25. Using heavy equipment they removed debris, including refrigerators and vending machines washed into the station by the tsunami.

Disappointing Political Response to the Disaster

March 11 tested the crisis management skills of the government, and the response from political leaders was far from satisfactory. The initial reactions by the Kan administration were rather confused because the tremendous damage from the earthquake and tsunami, along with the radiation leak at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, were “far beyond the scope of anticipation.” However, one wonders why Prime Minister Kan did not declare a “state of emergency” based on the Disaster Countermeasures Basic Law. Article 105 of the law states that the prime minister can declare a state of emergency if necessary and Article 109 declares that the Cabinet, “faced with urgent situation caused by a disaster,” can order urgent measures to maintain economic order and secure public welfare, such as regulating the distribution or sale of scarce daily commodities, when the Diet is out of session. According to discussions in the Diet, the prime minister’s office concluded that declaring a state of emergency was unnecessary because the Diet was in session and there was no critical situation, such as a shortage or soaring prices of daily commodities, listed in Article 109 of the law.⁷ This could explain the apparent lack of urgency in the response and suggests the top priority of the bureaucracy was to stay in the legal framework during peacetime. For example, many automobiles were damaged and dispersed by the tsunami, filling public spaces including the runway of Sendai airport.⁸ The Japanese civil code defines cars as personal effects of individuals and prohibits removal without the consent of the

⁷ Answer by Akira Kotaki, counsellor for the director-general for policy planning in the Cabinet, in the Budget Committee in the House of Councillors on March 22, 2011.

⁸ According to the Environmental Bureau of the Sendai Municipal Government, the number of cars moved by the tsunami was estimated at more 9,000 in Sendai.

owner, except on public roads such as in the case of traffic accidents. USFJ/USPACOM service members and their Japanese counterparts were therefore forced to work around crashed cars when they cleaned up the airport, and MLIT officials on the scene were reluctant to introduce any special exceptions to the rules for rehabilitation.⁹

The reaction of the Diet was also disappointing. The Diet has been “twisted” since the 2010 Upper House election: the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) maintains an absolute majority (302 of 480 seats) in the Lower House, while the DPJ along with its coalition partner, the People’s New Party, holds only 109 of 242 seats in the Upper House, where opposition parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Komeito can obstruct the legislative process. The Upper House was in deliberations over the budget for fiscal year 2011 (to begin April 1) at the time of the earthquake, and the partisan quarreling that colored the budget debate also cast a shadow over subsequent deliberations on the question of post-March 11 recovery.

On the evening of March 11, the leaders of the major parties met with Prime Minister Kan and agreed to work together to establish urgent countermeasures in response to the disasters. On March 19 Prime Minister Kan rudely called LDP president Sadakazu Tanigaki out of the blue and asked him to join the Cabinet to “share the political responsibility for restoration,” but Tanigaki declined immediately. Negotiations over reconstruction were often deadlocked and delayed, with the parties agreeing on principles but unable to settle on details. Over the summer, the LDP used the government’s proposal for a second supplemental budget to its own partisan advantage, insisting that Kan call a Lower House election as a precondition for supporting the provision of additional funds for reconstruction.

The disappointment of the Japanese electorate with the responses by the Cabinet and the Diet was reflected in an opinion survey published by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in early September. In response to the question “Whose activities for recovery from the 3.11 disaster do you appreciate?” 82 percent chose the JSDF; 73 percent volunteers; 52 percent firefighters; 42 percent local governments; and 40 percent police. Only 6 percent chose the Cabinet, and only 3 percent pointed out the Diet.¹⁰

Homework after Operation Tomodachi

Operation Tomodachi was concluded successfully by early May and demonstrated the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Although the operation was totally outside the range of military combat, at least three problems were revealed that deserve attention when considering future joint operations between USFJ/USPACOM and the JSDF.

The first challenge was establishing a computer network linking USFJ and the JSDF. Immediately after the disaster, USFJ headquarters tried to establish a computer network for communication with the JSDF, but the system did not work smoothly. In the case of a joint exercise, a computer network is usually established through advanced preparation of more than two months. USFJ had adjusted it by summer at a cost of \$2 million.¹¹

The second was information sharing on the Internet between USFJ/USPACOM and the JSDF. The classified information for daily operations in USFJ/USPACOM was posted on a website whose access was highly regulated. The JSDF should consider launching a website for classified information to share with USFJ/USPACOM. Discussions over both the guidelines for information sharing and the rules for information disclosure are also necessary.¹²

Finally, as homework exclusively for the Japanese side, there is the question of whether the prime minister, as commander in chief of the JSDF, can respond to a contingency in the future. Immediately after the earthquake and tsunami, Kan established a special disaster headquarters in the prime minister’s office but did not hold any meetings of the National Security Council. Faced with such an extraordinary disaster in which the JSDF would be deeply involved in the response, Kan should have called a National Security Council meeting. The crisis management system in the Cabinet, including the roles of advisers, should also be reviewed.

⁹ For example, the MLIT representatives at the meeting of the Joint Operation Coordination Center insisted on using pine tree wood for rebuilding the airport fence, based on the regular rules of MLIT. However, pine tree wood was hard to obtain after the earthquake and tsunami.

¹⁰ “Daishinsai deno Katsudō Hyōka: Seifu 6%, Jieitai 82%” [Evaluation of activities after the 3.11 disaster, 6% positive to government, while 82% positive to the JSDF], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 10, 2011.

¹¹ Personal interview at USFJ headquarters on September 20.

¹² Personal interview at USFJ headquarter on October 4. See also Craig Goodman et al., “Navy Information Professionals Support Operation Tomodachi: U.S. military commands and agencies work bilaterally with Japan to assist after devastating triple disasters,” *CHIPS* (July-September 2011), <http://www.doncio.navy.mil/CHIPS/ArticleDetails.aspx?ID=2490>.

Conclusion

Operation Tomodachi was remarkable, and its success “validated years of bilateral training, exercises, and planning.”¹³ It was the first joint operation in the field and provided great experiences and lessons for joint operations in the future. Crisis management in the prime minister’s office along with training for decisionmaking by the prime minister should be reconsidered.

According to a recent Yomiuri-Gallup opinion survey, 94 percent of Japanese appreciated Operation Tomodachi, but only 35 percent perceive U.S.-Japan relations as “good,” while 41 percent answered “poor.”¹⁴ Eighty-two percent of Japanese respondents believe the lack of progress in relocating Marine Corps Air Station Futenma on Okinawa has a negative impact on the bilateral relationship. Marines and soldiers stationed in Okinawa contributed enormously to Operation Tomodachi, and people in the damaged areas developed a positive image of U.S. forces. However, Operation Tomodachi did not have enough impact on people in Okinawa to change their perception of U.S. forces, and lightening the heavy burden of the U.S. military presence on Okinawa, including the issue of relocating Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, remains critical.

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¹³ “Cooperation in Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake,” adopted by the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee on June 21, 2011.

¹⁴ “Tai-bei Ishiki Kōten sezu” [Perception of the United States was not improved], *Yomiuri Shimbum*, December 18, 2011.