Short Term Policy Brief 4

The Chinese Reaction to the March 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami and the Nuclear Aftermath

Date: 10 April 2011

Author: Caroline Rose

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of ECRAN and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.
Executive summary

The earthquake and tsunami that hit north-eastern Japan on March 11 2011 has had devastating consequences for Japan. The ensuing nuclear crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant has further exacerbated the situation, and powerful aftershocks continue to impact on the north-east of the country causing concerns about the safety of Japan’s other nuclear power plants. China’s response to the disaster was swift and effective, and was warmly received in Japan. While this will have a positive impact on the relationship between the two countries in the short term, it is unlikely that it will fundamentally alter the often troubled nature of their political and diplomatic interaction. The impact of the nuclear crisis on China’s own nuclear energy policy may give decision makers pause for thought in the short term, but early indications suggest that the Japanese situation will not radically alter China’s plan to pursue nuclear power as a means of sustaining the country’s economic development and helping to satisfy its energy demands. The disaster has highlighted the need for bilateral, and East Asian, regional cooperation on nuclear safety and disaster prevention, which in turn would help to build confidence in the region. However, these discussions are very much in their infancy.

Main points

- China’s response to the crisis in Japan in the form of pledges of aid and assistance was rapid and warmly received by the Japanese government and people; this was China’s first time to offer assistance to its neighbour and was offered in the spirit of returning one favour with another (with reference to Japan’s assistance after the May 2008 Sichuan earthquake).
- Both governments stressed the long and friendly cooperative credentials of the China-Japan relationship, and the desirability of strengthening the strategic and mutually beneficial relationship.
- The limits to this rapprochement were soon revealed, however, when other ongoing issues re-emerged, albeit on the periphery. This indicates that the crisis has not had the effect of transcending perennial problems such as Japanese textbook content and territorial disputes.
- China announced the implementation of nuclear safety checks and halted approval for new nuclear power plants in the immediate aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi disaster.
- In the longer term, it is unlikely that the nuclear crisis will radically alter the general direction of China’s nuclear energy policy, which has been actively pursued since the early 2000s and has been identified as the best alternative to fossil fuels. Nonetheless, greater caution is emerging from China in relation to the safety aspects of the nuclear power industry and the need for robust systems.
- More broadly, the Fukushima crisis has highlighted the need for greater information sharing and cooperation on the development and management of nuclear energy in the region. East Asia currently lacks effective institutions and mechanisms, although the trilateral meetings between China, Japan and South Korea show promise.
Background Information

As the triple disaster unfolded in Japan, declarations of friendship and cooperation proliferated at both the official and popular levels in China. Messages of condolence were expressed at the highest level by Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. A shared experience of natural disasters reinforced feelings of solidarity, and the Chinese press and internet blogs commented on Japanese stoicism and resilience. Chinese pledges of assistance were immediate, expressed in terms of ‘returning the favour after receiving one’ in reference to Japan’s help after the Sichuan earthquake. A Xinhua report (widely reproduced across the Chinese press) suggested that the mutual support and understanding born from cooperation in dealing with natural disasters (‘the common enemies of mankind’) had brought the Chinese and Japanese people closer together and ‘perhaps even helped close old wounds.’ At the popular level, sentiment was mixed, with some netizens welcoming the earthquake. This was by no means the mainstream view, however, which was marked more by sympathy and expressions of condolence and support. Japanese Foreign Minister Matsumoto Takeaki expressed gratitude on March 19 for China’s messages of condolence and offers of emergency assistance. Using the standard terminology of friendship between China and Japan (‘two countries separated by a narrow strip of water’), he stressed the need to forge ahead with the development of their strategic and mutually-beneficial relationship.

Aid and assistance

The Chinese government made immediate offers of aid amounting to 30 million yuan-worth (US$4.57 million) of material aid such as blankets, tents, emergency lights, followed by gasoline and diesel shipments, drinking water, rubber gloves, and training shoes. The Chinese Red Cross also donated 6 million yuan (US$917,000) and numerous fund-raising activities were organised across Mainland China and in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. A 15-member Chinese rescue team was despatched to Ofunato in Iwate prefecture within two days of the earthquake and tsunami - the first overseas rescue team to reach the area. Chinese diplomatic staff in Japan made emergency arrangements for approximately 20,000 affected Chinese citizens who were either evacuated from the north-east of Japan to safer regions, or transported back to China. In the latter case, approximately one to two thousand Chinese were flown back to China in the first week to ten days after the earthquake and tsunami.

Nuclear safety checks and monitoring

In the immediate aftermath of the announcements about the crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection and the National Nuclear Safety Administration gave reassurances that the nuclear leaks posed no immediate threat to China. Nuclear safety checks of China’s thirteen nuclear power plants indicated that all were operating normally. The State Council announced on March 16 that it was temporarily suspending approval of nuclear power projects including those in preliminary stages of development. Nationwide radiation monitoring was implemented, in addition to the screening of Japanese imported goods. Reassurances about the lack
of direct effect of radiation on China were regularly made in the press, but as the nuclear crisis continued into early April, Chinese concerns mounted over higher than normal radiation levels of some cargo arriving from Japan. As a precautionary measure, the government announced it would ban the import of farm produce and foodstuffs from some parts of Japan.

Policy implications

a) Impact on China-Japan relations

The impact on economic relations will become clearer in the next quarter, but initial concerns were expressed about the possible impact on trade. Japan represents China's largest import market constituting 13% of China's total imports. In particular, Japanese joint ventures (especially in Tianjin, Dalian and Jiangsu) are expected to be affected due to shortages of component imports. For example, the Dongfeng Nissan factory in Hubei cut production due to part shortages. Exports in certain sectors (aluminium alloy for the auto industry) and from certain areas of China, for example Fujian and Shandong (agricultural products), are also expected to be negatively affected in the short term. The assessment of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, however, is that the earthquake will have only a limited impact on Sino-Japanese trade overall. Economic relations will most likely revive gradually, in line with the recommencement of production in Japanese factories and Japan's own recovery. The possibility of cooperation between China and Japan on the reconstruction of north-eastern Japan, which would boost both economies, was discussed at the preparatory meeting (held in Beijing in April) for the 7th annual Beijing-Tokyo Forum, which will be held in August 2011. Jointly organised by the China Daily and Japanese think tank Genron NPO, the Forum has become one of the more influential track two organisations in China-Japan relations, attended by government representatives, academics, business leaders, think tanks and the media from both countries.

At both the diplomatic and popular levels, the relationship has been boosted in the short term due to the expressions of sympathy and solidarity from China and the speed with which China offered its assistance. Although survey data is not yet available, this will help to create a certain amount of goodwill among the Japanese public and should improve China's image as reflected in the regular opinion polls that measure feelings of friendliness or closeness towards each other. Similarly, depending on how the Japanese government handles the nuclear crisis, perceptions of Japan in China may also improve, albeit temporarily, as they did shortly after the Sichuan earthquake. In the longer term, however, this will probably not be sufficient to dramatically alter the nature of the relationship which has been marked by inherent contradictions for much of the post-war period. There are occasional flare-ups often relating to Japan's perceived failure to acknowledge responsibility for the Sino-Japanese war 1937-1945, and the deep popular sense among many Chinese of grievances from the war.
Perennial issues regarding the content of Japanese school textbooks and their largely benign treatment of Japanese behaviour during the 1937-45 war, as well as activities around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and East China Sea (ECS) (where both countries claim sovereignty), resurfaced within weeks of the disaster. The Chinese media, for example, reported in late March on the content of newly-authorised Japanese junior high Japanese citizenship (civics) and geography textbooks, which contained more specific reference to Japan’s assertion of its sole ownership of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, as well as Takeshima/Dokdo (which the Republic of Korea [RoK] claims) and the Northern Territories (which Russia claims). Initially, the press took the usual angle of reporting on the RoK’s (generally more vociferous) protests to the textbook changes as a sort of proxy for China’s own grievance on the matter. In early April, however, the Chinese Foreign Ministry made a ‘solemn representation’ on the issue, claiming China’s ‘indisputable sovereignty’ over the Diaoyu islands.

In addition, Japanese vigilance over Chinese activities in the ECS has not declined in the wake of the crisis in north-eastern Japan, with the Japanese government claiming that a Chinese helicopter had flown too close to a Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) ship in the ECS. This elicited a response from the Chinese Foreign Ministry urging Japan to stop adversely affecting bilateral relations. In both cases, this hardly reflects a new attitude of ‘closing old wounds’ as the official Chinese news agency Xinhua had optimistically suggested, but it would be unrealistic to expect such matters to be dismissed so lightly. The content of Japanese school textbooks has been on and off the diplomatic agenda between China and Japan since 1982; the textbooks authorised in 2011 were the first batch of new junior high social studies textbooks produced under a revamped national curriculum, itself informed by the revision of the Fundamental Law of Education (FLE) in 2006. Of particular concern in some Japanese and Chinese circles was the possible effect of a new FLE clause that referred to the need to encourage love of country in textbooks - seen as an attempt to instil greater patriotism in schoolchildren. The inclusion of references to the Senkaku islands as Japanese territory in textbooks from this most recent round of authorisation is interpreted as a sign by the Chinese government that Japan is becoming more assertive in its territorial claims. The timing of the press reports on the results of textbook authorisation was purely coincidental – the results are always released in late March, and often generate some media response in Japan, China and South Korea, particularly where major changes to textbook content have been anticipated.

Similarly, the incident regarding the Chinese helicopter in the East China Sea forms part of the rumbling dispute over territory and, reputedly, large gas and oil deposits, to which both China and Japan lay claim. The dispute escalated in September 2010 when a Chinese fishing boat rammed two Japanese coastguard ships, sparking a major diplomatic issue. Although this was more or less resolved after the Chinese skipper was released from Japanese custody, concerns remain, with the Japanese MSDF and coastguard regularly reporting on the activities of Chinese fishing boats and other vessels operating in the area. The latest incident thus forms part of an ongoing pattern of
protest and counter-protest, which serves to keep the pot boiling on the ECS issue and demonstrates that the earthquake/tsunami and nuclear crisis could not keep such disputes off the agenda for very long.

b) Impact on Chinese nuclear energy policy

While China is a relative late-comer to nuclear power (its first nuclear power station became operational in 1991 at Qinshan in Zhejiang province), rapid economic development and the concomitant increase in energy needs, particularly since the early 2000s, have meant that the development of nuclear power has become integral to China’s energy strategy. Nuclear power is seen as an effective, sustainable and clean means of reducing China’s reliance on fossil fuels and satisfying energy demands on which it relies for over 70 per cent of its current needs. Thus a general consensus emerged within the policymaking community in China in the early 2000s on the need to expand nuclear power generation, albeit with differences of opinion on how it should be developed (the debate was split between those who favoured the development of indigenous technology and those who favoured importing advanced foreign technology – the latter view prevailing). The 10th five-year plan (FYP, 2001-5) provided for the construction of eight new nuclear reactors, while the 11th FYP (2006-11) was more ambitious, aiming to ‘actively develop’ nuclear power plants. The 12th FYP (2011-15) remains committed to nuclear energy. 13 nuclear power stations are currently in operation in China, with 27 under construction, and a further 50 in the planning stage.

Early indications suggest that the Fukushima disaster has not produced a u-turn on China’s plans for nuclear energy development. In the more critical analyses of Japan’s situation, problems were attributed to the age of the Fukushima reactors or to design flaws at the plant. This lies in contrast to positive appraisals of China’s nuclear energy industry in terms of its safety record, the use of advanced and safer technologies, and rigorous standards dictating the location of nuclear power plants (that is, away from active fault lines or areas that have previously recorded magnitude 6.0 earthquakes). By late March, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the government ministry in charge of economic planning, stated that while nuclear safety standards would continue to be reinforced, China’s nuclear programme would continue. In early April, however, the NDRC indicated that the use of nuclear power would be decreased, and solar power increased up to 2020, suggesting a slight adjustment in thinking about the relative weightings of the energy mix. In addition, some Chinese commentaries argue that lessons must be drawn from the Fukushima Daiichi situation in terms of location of plants, enhancing tsunami resistance (most of China’s existing nuclear power plants are on coastal sites), and ensuring adjacent resources are adequate (for example, sufficient water supply if plants are to be built inland). Public opinion in China is not generally seen as an obstacle to the government’s plans (possibly due to lack of awareness), but the potential for opposition should perhaps not be overlooked as Chinese people watch the Fukushima crisis develop and consider the potential risks to their own communities should new plants be sited locally (where consultation currently appears to be rather light-touch). While the Chinese media was quick to
reassure its readership that there was no immediate danger in China from Japan’s nuclear disaster and that China’s own reactors were safe, subsequent reports about raised (though still ‘extremely low’) levels of radioactive iodine having been detected on some Chinese agricultural crops (spinach and lettuce), along with the ban on some foodstuffs from Japan, may raise greater awareness among the Chinese public about the hazards associated with nuclear accidents.

The Fukushima crisis has highlighted the need for greater cooperation not just between China and Japan, but across East Asia in terms of nuclear safety, information sharing and energy development. Criticisms were voiced by the Chinese, Russian and South Korean governments in early April about the lack of information from Japan in relation to the continued pumping of radioactive water into the sea. Raising concerns about marine safety in the region as a whole, the three governments called for prior notification and more accurate information from Japan. Despite various attempts over the years to establish a regional organisation akin to the Association of South East Asian Nations or the European Union (EU), North East Asia still lacks a robust institutional framework to deal with the sorts of issues arising from the current disaster. Trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and the RoK on disaster prevention and nuclear safety was discussed at the Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Kyoto on March 19 and is to be discussed further during the summit to be held in Tokyo in May, where the Japanese government has indicated it will share its experiences and lessons from the disaster. This would present a valuable opportunity to explore proposals for a much needed energy and safety infrastructure in the region – building, for example, on the work of the Asian Nuclear Safety Network, established in 2002 with the purpose of sharing knowledge and experience amongst nine Asian countries (including China, Japan and the RoK) with support from European partners and the US. The trilateral summits between China, Japan and the RoK have become more established in the last two to three years, and have already yielded an agreement on food safety. If existing plans for proposed nuclear plants in all three countries were to go ahead, there would be upwards of 300 reactors in the region, with the bulk of these in China. Given the Fukushima Daiichi disaster and its impact across the region, the need for a more robust institutional framework in East Asia to deal with such events appears not to be lost on government leaders, and should be further encouraged by the EU.

This might be best achieved by lobbying either directly or via global nuclear energy governance mechanisms. In addition, leverage may be gained through individual EU (and non-EU) government and corporate links with China. China has sought technology transfer mainly from the US, Canada, France, Russia and Germany. In particular, the French company Areva has concluded contracts with the Guangdong Nuclear Power Corporation and has supplied technology to the Qinshan (Zhejiang) and Daya Bay (Guangdong) power plants, as have German and Spanish companies. Japanese companies have also entered the Chinese nuclear energy market, most notably US-based Westinghouse (purchased by Toshiba in 2006), which is involved in the construction of four plants using third generation technology, in addition to Hitachi and Mitsubishi Electric. China is still somewhat reliant on its international partners for technology transfer, safety training, education and operations management, though these skills are gradually being developed locally. In addition, its
nuclear power plants are subject to international standards and inspections. But safety culture remains a concern, and an area in which the EU should lobby while China is still seeking international input to develop its nuclear energy sector.