

Japan's Worst-case Scenarios: The Nine Blind Spots



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Through RJIF's inaugural project, "**The Independent Investigation Commission on the Fukushima Nuclear Accident**", the vulnerability of Japan's crisis management system rose to the fore. In response, we thus initiated the "**Crisis Management Project**" in May 2012. This initiative focused on nine crises scenarios that Japan may face in the near future (e.g., natural disasters, terrorism, and military clashes) and evaluated the current crisis management system and its outstanding issues.

For this project, we engaged 11 scholars and specialists to identify the crisis management blind spots by examining the worst-case scenarios under each of the nine themes. Beyond this, we sought to determine the course of action that would be taken were such crises to occur. To this end, five researchers and experts conducted an inter-disciplinary analysis of the cases from five different viewpoints (the legislative system, public-private cooperation, international strategy, government, and communication) and proposed necessary counter-crisis measures. Upon publication, our editors then conducted a rewrite based on the established scenarios emerging from discussions between the theme authors and research team members.

Project Summary

The nine crises on which we focused our case studies for this project span a variety of themes ranging from natural disasters, to terrorism, to military clashes, as listed below (details on pages 2-3):

- **Senkaku incident**
- **Japan government bond market plunge**
- **Tokyo Metropolitan Megaquake**
- **Cyberterrorism**
- **Pandemic**
- **Energy crisis**
- **Collapse of North Korea**
- **Nuclear terrorism**
- **Weakened population**

Experts well versed in each area (including university professors, think tank researchers, specialists, and journalists) investigated past crisis management phenomena and the corresponding government responses. Through in-depth interviews with government officials and thorough debates, we established the crisis mechanisms, triggers, and paths of development. Such observations formed the basis of our "worst-case scenarios".

Each scenario represents neither a prediction nor a probable forecast; they are the products of an imaginative thought process for what would happen if the crisis did develop in the most catastrophic manner possible. In our investigation of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident, we found that, within the crisis management process, the potential risks were explained only as "unforeseen circumstances". Instead of conceiving of such scenarios merely as abstract figments of the imagination unlikely to actually transpire, we need to critically analyze the current system and its capacity to withstand a crisis.

Toward analyzing the current crisis management system in Japan, we administered an interdisciplinary analysis of the nine worst-case scenarios from five different viewpoints (the legislative system, public-private cooperation, international strategy, government, and communication). In this way, we were able to identify the problems and their root causes, and to suggest specific counter-measures in each case.

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Part 1: The 9 worst case scenarios

1) Senkaku incident: the unexpected denouement of defensive and offensive posturings over the islands

Aiming at the Senkakus, China strengthens its offensive capabilities. In order to protect its territory, Japan must prepare for a battle entailing a collective effort; it will require not only military force, but also efforts in the spheres of diplomacy, politics, economics, and information transmission. Once the smoke has cleared, the outcome will dramatically alter the prevailing order and power dynamics of East Asia.

2) Japanese government bond market plunge: the “boiled frog” risk facing Japan

Japanese government debt has soared to more than 200% of GDP. At just 10%, consumption tax is a mere drop in the bucket. Nevertheless, owing to the competitiveness of the manufacturing industry and the sheer enormity of the economy, a southern European-type collapse can be avoided. But what awaits in the aftermath...?

3) Tokyo Metropolitan Megaquake: collapse of an Amazon-type society

The probability of an earthquake directly hitting Tokyo within the next 30 years surpasses 70% in some areas of the city. Preventive measures are being taken based on the lessons of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and the Great East Japan Earthquake. However, the idea is merely a “convenient scenario”. Preparations thus do not assume the worst, and the demonstrable effectiveness of the measures is therefore questionable.

4) Cyberterrorism: targeting urban infrastructure

Apparently, some countries – including Israel, North Korea, and China – are amassing hackers to form a covert cyber attack force. A new war targeting the modern lifeline, threatening to paralyze critical infrastructures, has thus begun.

5) Pandemic: the day the doctors disappeared

In the midst of a raging unknown virus outbreak, the medical field will face the crisis of an impending collapse through lack of adequate medical staff and equipment. Solving the problem will hinge on whether difficult decisions can be made about who should die first.

6) Energy crisis: an invisible chain of crises beginning from a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz

Forty years have passed since the oil crisis stemming from the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Although there has not been much cry for a review of Japan's energy strategy, there is a growing dependence on the Middle East. The ongoing state of affairs is such that a disturbance in the Straits could lead to a nationwide standstill for Japan.

7) Collapse of North Korea: the three anti-nuclear principles, Japan's moment of decision

In the wake of the unification of North and South, the rising nationalism radiating out from the Korean Peninsula will spread through East Asia in a domino effect. The forbidden scenario of a nuclear-armed Japan will become a real possibility, and regional dynamics will immediately destabilize.

8) Nuclear terrorism: lessons from 3/11

Nuclear bombs have directly hit Kasumigaseki and Nagatacho, the two main administrative centers of Japan, and key government officials including the Prime Minister are all dead. How are the remaining survivors meant to proceed at that moment? The focus should be on training in earnest for the worst conceivable scenario, but...

9) Weakened population: 2050, the day youths become terrorists

Gradually but surely, the shrinking population will undermine Japan. Unless prompt action is taken, despair will sweep Japanese society in just a few short decades. However, to avert such a scenario, we must be prepared to relinquish the traditional Japanese views on society, family, and marriage.

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Part 2: Analyses of the Scenarios

1) The legislative system

The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant Accident caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake has made clear that, because of flaws in the legal system, no effective measures are in place to confront a major crisis. Through this lens, we will analyze the nine worst-case scenarios and investigate the corresponding systemic challenges.

2) Public-private cooperation

Focusing on the public and private sector elements that play an important role in risk governance, we will clarify the problems with the current system and suggest possible improvements.

3) International strategy

Crisis management is required for effective defense capabilities, along with the legislation needed to use such forces and to maintain policy organizations. In addition, political leaders must have both the ability to manage politics domestically through crisis communication to the public and the strategic communication skills to pursue policies that are favorable to the country in the international context.

4) Government - Kantei (Prime Minister's Office)

In case of a major security threat or a large-scale disaster crossing multiple areas of jurisdiction, the main center for crisis management will go beyond the framework of the inter-ministerial to convene at the Prime Minister's Office. This scenario, however, highlights several challenges arising out of the current government's system of functioning.

5) Communication

Communication is a means to bring a situation to the desired direction. Taking the perspective of "Risk Communication" and "Crisis Communication", the purposes of which are to manage risks and manage crises, respectively, we will offer suggestions on how best to prepare for the future in light of the challenges that emerge from consideration of the worst-case scenarios.

【 The Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation (RJIF) 】

The Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation was launched in March 2011 as a response to the widespread devastation unfolding in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that struck eastern Japan. The role of the RJIF is to be a "Think Tank Complex", combining the multiple functions of networking, media relations and an intellectual club around the think tank function at its core. At this historical turning point, not only in Japan but also for the world at large, we aim to become an intellectual incubator to develop ideas for the regeneration of Japan – and to ultimately bring those ideas to fruition.

Please refer to the RJIF website for details: <http://rebuildjpn.org/en/>