

Japan's leadership averted worst-case disaster, researcher says

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Former Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan, shown in 2012, did a better job than is often thought in dealing with the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear crisis, according to Stanford research associate Kenji Kushida.

Faced with an unprecedented disaster in postwar Japan, then-Prime Minister Naoto Kan and his Democratic Party of Japan government handled the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster better than originally perceived, according to new Stanford research.

It could have been far worse.

That's the conclusion of research associate Kenji Kushida of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center. He wrote in the journal *Japanese Political Economy* that Kan's party had to overcome bureaucratic problems and a lack of emergency planning, both of which they inherited after winning a landslide victory in 2009. The Fukushima nuclear crisis in March 2011 occurred when the plant was hit by a tsunami that resulted from a 9.0 earthquake off the coast of Tohoku, Japan, which claimed more than 15,000 lives.

Three of the plant's six nuclear reactors melted down and more than 300,000 people were evacuated. At the time, the Democratic Party of Japan and TEPCO, the private company that operated the power plant, were criticized for their responses.

"Japan's political leadership, and particularly Prime Minister Kan, has been blamed widely for worsening the crisis as the nuclear disaster unfolded," Kushida said. "However, an objective analysis of events as they transpired suggests that the political leadership, newly in power after over 50 years of virtually uninterrupted rule by its opposition, had inherited a very difficult situation, with vested interests, lack of emergency planning and insufficient bureaucratic capacity."

Kushida examined reports by Japanese government commissions, independent committees, a private investigation, TEPCO, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, among others. He also conducted interviews with key observers.

'Saved Japan'

Based on his research, Kushida said he believes that Japan's political

leadership reined in a disaster that could have spiraled out of control on a far larger scale.

"Rather, Prime Minister Kan, often accused of excessive micro-management and a counterproductive management style, was actually responsible for a government stance and concrete actions that, in some sense, saved Japan from a far worse disaster," he said.

In the article, Kushida said it was difficult for the general public, inside and outside Japan, to gauge how Japan's government was responding. "In the media confusion surrounding the nuclear accident, and subsequent politicized debates over the Tohoku disaster, the (Japanese) general public was left largely confused," he wrote.

Critiques focused on delays in declaring the emergency and evacuations, chaotic press conferences, micro-management and a slow response to hydrogen explosions at the plant.

But Kan, Kushida wrote, understood the broad risk to Japan if the Fukushima crisis got even worse. So he wrested control of the situation from TEPCO and the bureaucracy. Japan does not have martial law.

"Kan played a critical role in shifting the government's nuclear response into emergency mode," which allowed, for example, sustained water-cooling of the hot reactors, according to Kushida.

Kushida noted that the Democratic Party of Japan ran its 2009 election campaign on "seizing power from the bureaucracies" – giving rise to the criticism during the Fukushima event that it lacked the ability to coordinate such expertise in emergency situations.

"The DPJ's inexperience governing the country was clearly manifested in policy paralysis during its early days in power, suggesting that the party

might not have the capacity to deal with Japan's largest postwar natural disaster and nuclear accident," Kushida wrote.

On the other hand, he added, the DPJ inherited a government and nuclear industry structure from the Liberal Democratic Party, which had enjoyed virtually uninterrupted power in Japan from 1955 until 2009. It was the LDP, not the DPJ, that had created the policies, units and procedures that were called upon in the Fukushima disaster.

Kushida found that Japan's existing government structures were not up to the challenge of dealing with Fukushima – no matter which political party was in power.

"Existing procedures and organizations were drastically inadequate for planning and executing an evacuation, and the government suffered shortcomings in information gathering, expertise, and on-the-ground response during the crisis," he wrote.

Kushida said that Kan's leadership was "beneficial in that he took control of a situation in which the locus of responsibility became ambiguous during the crisis and he solved several serious information and coordination problems."

As for blaming Kan's style, Kushida said that strong leadership was precisely what Japan needed at the time: "He did not measurably worsen the crisis, although his relatively abrasive leadership style (for Japanese norms or expectations, at least) alienated many with whom he worked."

Kushida said that much of the "blame-game" after the crisis was a result of the Liberal Democratic Party using Fukushima against the Democratic Party of Japan for electoral gain. In 2012, the LDP regained power based on this strategy.

American perspective

The lessons of Fukushima apply to America's nuclear industry and political leadership as well, Kushida said.

"The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission is more independent from industry than Japan's regulators at the time, but the American political leadership needs to continue applying sustained pressure and attention to ensure that it remains as neutral and objective as possible," he said in an interview.

Kushida suggested that America's [political leadership](#) should diligently examine the repeated extensions of the maximum lifespan of [nuclear power plants](#), the increased risk of nuclear power plant inundation due to climate change, and the need for contingency plans when cascading events overwhelm nuclear plant operators.

He also pointed to the importance of input from outside the established nuclear engineering community on key issues.

Kushida, who grew up in Tokyo, describes himself as "very deeply attached to Japan." When the 2011 disaster hit, he was in the United States attending graduate school – and felt helpless.

"I desperately wanted to do something to help, and over time it became clear that my potential contribution with the greatest impact would be an objective analysis," he said.

Kushida's initial research grew out of a conference report that he wrote for Shorenstein APARC director Gi-Wook Shin.

Today, Japan's 48 nuclear reactors all remain offline for safety checks. Now in power, the Liberal Democratic Party plans to have them

reactivated once the Nuclear Regulation Agency confirms their compliance with the new safety standards introduced after the Fukushima nuclear crisis. Prior to the earthquake and tsunami of 2011, Japan had generated 30 percent of its electrical power from nuclear reactors.

Provided by Stanford University

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