

Reflections on the Japan Earthquake and Tsunami

Kazuhiko Togo
The Kyoto Sangyo University

Two weeks have passed since the earthquake and tsunami of March 11 in northeastern Japan. Yet the full-scale aftermath of the natural disasters in all aspects of life in Japan and abroad is far from clear. However, it may be worthwhile to record the initial reflections from the first ten days following this unprecedented calamity.

The March 11 Earthquake and Tsunami

The first information to reach the public was of the unprecedented might of the earthquake and the ensuing tsunami. The earthquake, initially reported to be of magnitude 8.8, was later revised to 9.0-1,450 times stronger than the 1995 Kobe earthquake. However, most of the deaths and damages were caused by the subsequent tsunami, which wiped away entire villages along the northeastern coast of Japan. There is no clear estimate of the damage caused. The official death toll was 8,277 and the number of missing persons was listed as 12,722 as of March 20 (*Sankei Shimbun*, March 20, 2011). There is no way of determining the exact number of missing, but there is a general feeling that the number can easily surpass several tens of thousands. Private-sector think tanks began to give estimates of the damage as between 10 and 15 trillion yen: Nomura Shoken estimated 12.7 trillion and Daiwa Shoken estimated 14.3 trillion (*Asahi Shimbun*, March 19, 2011), but these figures are far from confirmed.

The second general impression shared by the world after the catastrophe was that

people who were subjected to this horrible disaster behaved with restraint, self-control, and the spirit of mutual help. There was no looting or widespread panic reported. Reports from outside media on the initial days after the calamity were quick to notice and applaud these Japanese characteristics. Words of sympathy and readiness for assistance were sent from all over the world: to date, 114 countries and 24 international organizations have offered assistance and 14 countries have sent assistance teams (<http://www.mofa.go.jp>, March 16, 2011).

The third immediate observation concerned the impairment of the Fukushima nuclear reactors. The government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which was in charge of these reactors, reportedly gave the impression that the company and the government might not be fully competent to handle a disaster of this level, and all the more, might be intentionally covering up this disaster. Successive explosions exacerbated the situation. The outside cover building of the first reactor exploded on the afternoon of March 12, and the cover building of the third reactor exploded on the morning of March 14. In the morning of March 15, an explosion occurred inside the steel cover of the second reactor, and that afternoon the fire and explosion substantially damaged the outside cover of the building that contains the fourth reactor. A feeling of a lack of effective command combined with a possible cover up rapidly spread inside and outside Japan (*Yukan Fuji*, “ZAK-ZAK”, March 18, 2011).

It was only on March 17 that water operations from the helicopters and fire trucks of Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF) and the Tokyo Fire Department began to have some impact. Helicopter water-drop operations did not work, but water-spraying operations from the ground did, and on March 19 and 20 the Tokyo Fire Department succeeded in continuously showering the third reactor. The SDF's fire trucks began showering the fourth reactor on March 20. Most encouraging was the reintroduction of electricity to the second reactor on March 20, and the same outcome is expected to be accomplished very soon with regard to the third to sixth plants. However, TEPCO and the government of Japan have not yet reached the point of assuring the public of complete nuclear safety. Japanese who have relatives or friends in the southern part of Japan began sending their family members to those residences. A partial exodus of the foreign community in Japan also began to take place.

The Catastrophic Events and Japan's Relations with the Outside World

After the catastrophic events, words of sympathy were sent to Japan in all forms. On an individual basis there is little doubt that those who have friends abroad received heartfelt messages inquiring about their safety, expressing condolences, and wishing for Japan's future recovery. I am no exception, and from the countries where I have friends I received many heartfelt and moving e-mails, including those from the United States, Russia, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia.

These messages were the first source of reflection. I would like to dwell on two messages that particularly caught my attention. The first message that I received on March 13 came from a specialist on global security living in Washington, D.C.: "This evening Japan was the only subject at the Washington dinner party I attended. Everyone has a friend there, or has been there. My wife and I were in Iwate recently. Americans care about Japan. There was a sense of pain." When I read this message, I saw in the expression "sense of pain" the weighty history that developed between Japan and the United States after the end of World War II. After Japan's defeat, Japan and the United States developed cooperative relations with sincerity and goodwill, not necessarily because we were particularly fond of each other, but because we found new and shared interests and values. The person who sent me the message was not a Japan specialist. But the "sense of pain" that he described seems to have touched upon the essence of our relationship, the invaluable relations the two countries have created in the 66 years since World War II.

Given the massiveness of the disaster and existing goodwill from both sides, this natural catastrophe might be a golden opportunity to strengthen the alliance in an unprecedented manner.[1] The alliance was somewhat troubled recently due to concerns about the U.S. base in Okinawa. Because of the general recognition of the rise of China and its military implications, the general support of the Japanese people for the alliance was on the rise. But when it came to Okinawa, because of disputes over the relocation of Futenma bases to Henoko as the basis of Marine stationing and training, there emerged a feeling of impasse, discomfort, and loss about the U.S. Marines being stationed there.

Massive assistance by the U.S. military from its bases all over Japan, implemented

with full cooperation with Japan's SDF, was expected to be widely shown on Japanese TV. The flying-in of rescue materials such as water, food, blankets, and kerosene would have been very similar to the image of the Berlin Airlift during the Cold War. Through television images, the Japanese people instinctively would have realized that the U.S. Marines profoundly serve the alliance, which helps and benefits the country in times of real crisis.

Immediately after the incident, there was a sign that things were moving in that direction. The U.S. military established "Operation Tomodachi (Friend)" immediately after the incident to perform the kind of visible rescue and assistance operation described above. On the morning of March 13, two helicopters from the aircraft carrier *Ronald Reagan* arrived in the vicinity of the devastated area to fly food to refugee camps (*Asahi Shimbun*, March 14, 2011). But on March 14, due to nuclear radiation, implementation of this operation was suspended (*Asahi Shimbun*, March 15, 2011). According to other reports, however, the operations did not end there. On March 20, a U.S. media source reported that U.S. Marines were deployed from Okinawa immediately after the incident as part of a post-tsunami humanitarian aid effort to the Yokota Airport; they were delayed there, but eventually arrived at the Matsushima Airport near the site of the disaster and distributed relief materials in cooperation with the SDF; their activity was again delayed because of fears about nuclear radiation. It remains to be seen whether it was only the Fukushima nuclear plant explosion that hindered full-scale U.S. military assistance or, as was indicated by the latest U.S. report, much of the inaction was due to the bureaucratic inertia and lack of leadership on the Japanese side.

The second message that I would like to introduce came from a South Korean friend, also on March 13. He is an academic I befriended in the fall of 2007 when I was a guest professor at Seoul National University. He wrote: "I am so shocked and saddened by the catastrophic tsunami that hit the Tohoku region last Friday. I visited the beautiful city of Sendai seven or eight years ago and still have fond memories of it. I am just shaking my head in total disbelief and horror at the tragic and heart-rending footage of the catastrophe. I hope that you and your family are all safe. The fact that I can lead a normal life over here while the Japanese people are suffering so much fills me with profound guilt."

The inclusion of the phrase “profound guilt” in this message of sympathy was something that I had never expected. “Profound guilt” has always been associated in my thinking with the issue of Japan’s annexation of Korea (1910-1945). It is my view that there are many Japanese who remember this period with a certain sense of “profound guilt”, particularly regarding the full-scale policy of the “Japanization (kominka)” of the Korean people. It intended to replace Korean culture and identity with Japanese. In my opinion, there was no justification for using the phrase “profound guilt” regarding the South Korean position on the catastrophic events in Japan, where clearly South Korea does not have any responsibility. And yet, the humility and deep feeling of sympathy coming from his expression of “profound guilt” was deeply moving. There emerged a natural feeling in me, and I am certain, in the minds and hearts of many Japanese who may read this, of a profound sense of respect for a nation that is capable and willing to convey such a message despite the fact that the same nation has quite legitimately asked the Japanese to express “profound guilt” for past history. Given the enormous goodwill coming from South Korea, China, and all the countries of Asia and the world, a proper understanding of the essence of these messages by the Japanese people could entail a greater humility on the part of the Japanese themselves, leading to a better understanding and remembrance of Japan’s past history.

Natural Calamity, Reconstruction, and Hope for the Future

When a calamity of this magnitude occurs, the human tragedy accompanying it is beyond words. The reports of those who lost the people dearest to them continue on television and the Internet. The sense of despair that engulfed them against the background of total devastation leaves nothing but an apocalyptic picture. However, if a tragedy of that magnitude overwhelms that wide a region, one cannot help but wonder if there is a way to revive and recreate these devastated regions. Hopefully, sometime in the future, the Japanese would be able to utilize this calamity as a springboard to create a new, never before imagined, Japan. It is often discussed in Japan that, from the end of World War II until the end of the Cold War (i.e., the end of the Showa Era), Japan developed a clear national objective of “hard work in a peaceful environment”. But when Japan moved into the era of Heisei, it began to go adrift, having lost its national objective. Can this unprecedented calamity be an occasion to eradicate the sense of being adrift and become a springboard for a

creation of a new Japan?

News emerging so far is encouraging in that the Japanese people are exhibiting remarkable self-restraint and a spirit of mutual help to overcome this hardship. But what comes after the initial period of reestablishing the minimum conditions necessary for survival and bringing in control and stability? Japan will need to think about what should be done in the period of real reconstruction that will follow the initial period of reestablishment of survival. Since the suffering caused by this calamity is so enormous, there is a need to recreate this region, with new vision and imagination to make these places into a new model for Japan in the 21st century. Four essential characteristics should be incorporated in the creation of this new Japan.

First, there is an inevitable need to reconstruct the everyday lifelines, comprised of water, gas, and electricity supplies. The necessity of rebuilding houses is of utmost importance. Naturally, there should be a well-researched plan to create new infrastructure to protect the region from future earthquakes and tsunamis.

Second, reconstruction of destroyed economic activities, comprising the first area of agriculture, fishery, and timber; the second area of industrial production; and the third area of service industries, is essential.

Third, considering that these reconstructions would have a new significance for Japan in the 21st century, hopefully the reconstruction will be achieved with a new plan, vision, and design. The development of these three areas of economic activities, as described above, must be balanced, not only in substance but also in terms of a better harmonized division of land. A dream opportunity for architects and landscape designers would emerge. Such architects as Kuma Kengo, who has already asserted that new construction in the 21st century needs to be achieved through harmonization with nature and full utilization of locally produced materials, should be incorporated in full in the reconstruction activities. Yoko Ono, wife of the late Beatle John Lennon, appeared on a late-night television talk show on March 14 and stated that the devastated area could be transformed into an architects' dreamland with all-new, imaginative types of ultra-modern housing and building construction to mark a new Japan of the 21st century.

Even if all of these regions and areas may not be transformed into an architects' dreamland, it should be possible to envisage new development that preserves the region's natural beauty, where protection against natural disasters could be accomplished without transforming the entire coast and seashore into wall lines, like the ones in Berlin or Gaza, of massive concrete blocks and tetrapods. It should be possible to redevelop the area based on planned development where nature, industry, and living quarters can be created with their own identities but with mutual harmony. New housing and living quarters could be developed with designs that create harmony not only among the houses but with nature as well.

Fourth and last, we need to ask how and by whom these objectives can be achieved. For this kind of fundamental reconstruction, where lifestyle and regional scenery become critical factors for a creative and imaginative resolution, initiatives should come from regional leadership. Those initiatives must come from the governorship and the leaders of local towns and villages. The government naturally plays the critical role of providing budgetary assistance, establishing a new legal structure as necessary, and facilitating and coordinating knowledge, materials, and human contributions for reconstruction. The best ideas, materials, and people should come not only from inside Japan but from abroad. The best city and landscape planners and architects who are prepared to share their talent and wisdom must be invited to compete in providing the best of their visions. The best of world industry that may be interested in establishing their branches in a region where total reconstruction is needed should be welcomed. These decisions have to be made without delay.

Concluding Remarks

The news still continues to report on the desperate efforts to control the Fukushima nuclear plants. There exists a huge need to supply materials for survival, such as water, blankets, and kerosene, to those refugees who are cut off from normal access to such supplies. U.S. assistance, particularly its huge military mobilization via helicopters, has not been shown enough on television and the Internet. Japan's gratefulness toward the United States clearly exists, as Ambassador Fujisaki stated eloquently at the Brookings panel discussion on March 18, but as far as I can tell, the fruit of security cooperation has not been displayed to its maximum extent.

As to Japan's gratefulness toward all other nations that have helped it, as in the case with the United States, it clearly exists, but time may be necessary to understand it in the deepest sense of international cooperation and reconciliation. Prime Minister Kan sent his plea to the Japanese people on March 18, one week after the calamity, to make this unprecedented disaster an opportunity to recreate Japan. The general message was correct, but what to do and how to do it were far from clear.

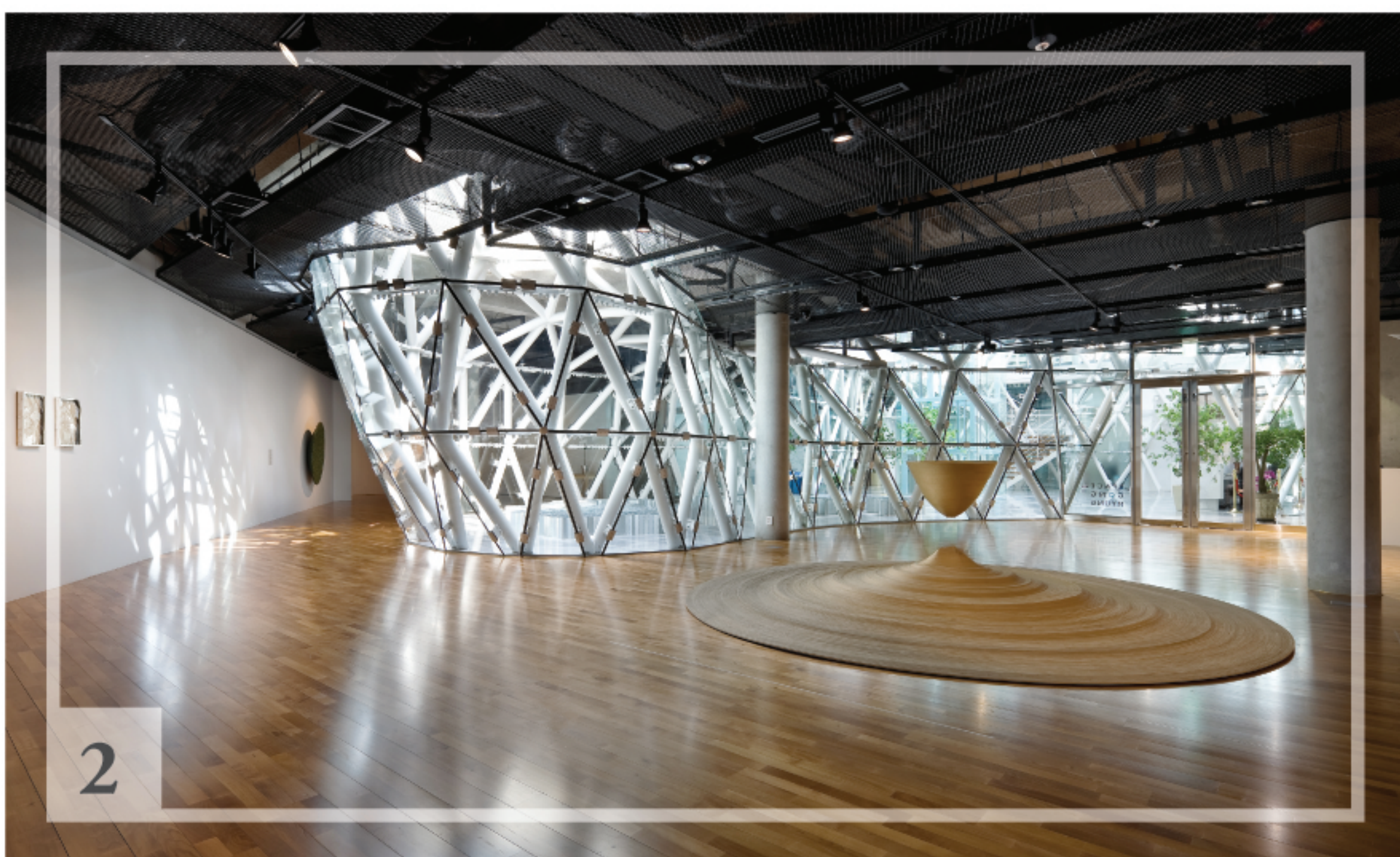
It is hard to imagine that Japan will let things simply float adrift because of the ineptitude of the current leadership. The choice is either an emergence of a creative and accountable political and social structure where civil society and regions play greater roles, or a resurgence of a government seeking a strong political hand that plays well into people's feelings of anger and despair. My hope lies in the former.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

[1]I happened to have been staying in Washington, D.C., from March 14 to 19, and I raised this issue of alliance and the earthquake in my private talks with U.S. opinion leaders and a panel discussion held by the Brookings Institution on March 18 on "Devastation in Japan: The Aftermath and Implications of the World's Fifth Largest Earthquake".



Kazuhiko Togo is a professor and Director of the Institute for Global Affairs at the Kyoto Sangyo University. He joined the Foreign Ministry of Japan in 1968, worked extensively on Soviet/Russian affairs, as well as on Europe, America, international law, and economics, and served as Ambassador of Japan to the Netherlands before retiring in 2002. In 1995, he began teaching in universities in Moscow and Tokyo, and after retirement he taught in Leiden, Princeton, Tansui (Taiwan), Santa Barbara, and Seoul, and at the Temple University Japan Campus before joining the Kyoto Sangyo University faculty in 2009. His recent publications include (in English) *Japan's Foreign Policy 1945-2009* and (in Japanese) (1) *The Inside Story of the Negotiations on the Northern Territories*, (2) *History and Foreign Policy: Yasukuni, Asia and Tokyo Tribunal*, and (3) *What Japan Lost after WWII: Scenery, Human Beings and State*.



The Asan Institute for Policy Studies was founded as an independent think tank to provide innovative policy solutions and spearhead public discourse on the core issues that Korea, East Asia and the global community face. In particular, the Institute's mandate is to contribute to the peace, prosperity, and unification of the Korean peninsula by engaging issues pertaining to national security, foreign affairs, and governance, both domestic and global. "Human security" matters such as human rights, humanitarian crises, energy and environment are also a major focus. The goal of the Institute is not only to offer policy solutions but also to train experts in public diplomacy and related fields in order to strengthen Korea's capacity to better tackle some of the most pressing problems affecting the country, the region and the world today.





9 788997 046096
ISBN 978-89-97046-09-6
ISBN 978-89-97046-06-5(세트)