

The Tsunami, the Middle East and the U.S.

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The earthquake and tsunami in Japan is a terrible catastrophe which has killed thousands, injured more and displaced hundreds of thousands. In addition to this devastation, there is also the possible that the nuclear reactors hit by the tsunami could continue to leak dangerous radiation putting millions at risk. Thus efforts to prevent further harm must begin while efforts to find survivors and begin stabilizing the damage are still underway.

This tsunami is also illustrative of the unique position in which the U.S. still finds itself in this increasingly multi-polar world, and a reminder that in some important ways the U.S. remains the world's only true superpower. One way to see this is that the U.S. is the only country that is going to be heavily involved, financially and otherwise, in addressing the two biggest global developments this year, the tsunami and the rapidly changing the Middle East. China, for example, may play a role in helping Japan, but will not be investing any resources in trying to make a smooth transition in the new Middle East. Several European countries will come to Japan's assistance, but not to the extent that the U.S. will.

Japan has been a close and valuable ally of the U.S. for decades. Many European countries also enjoy strong relations with Japan, but the U.S.-Japan tie is different. There are extremely close political, economic and cultural ties between the two democratic, baseball playing, Pacific powers, dating back to the Cold War when Japan was a key western ally in the effort to contain the Soviet Union. Accordingly, many Americans view Japan not just as an ally, but as a friend. Fortunately, Japan is far from a poor country and has resources of its own. Nonetheless, at a time like this allies must help each other.

Offering Japan our full support at this time, in recovering from the tsunami, limiting further damage to the nuclear reactors or anything else, is the right thing to do and demonstrates that American friendship is still worth something. The Obama administration understands this and has sought to offer Japan as much help as possible.

To some extent the tsunami has displaced Libya, Egypt and the extraordinary changes and struggles throughout much of the Middle East in the media and the American consciousness. These issues, however, also remain extremely important and challenging for the U.S. Playing a constructive role in Egypt's transition, determining what role the U.S. can play in accelerating Moammar Gaddafi's defeat in Libya without committing the U.S. to another long and costly conflict, and crafting a new strategy for the rest of the region would be difficult even if the U.S. was flush with cash and had little else on their foreign policy agenda, but we are not that fortunate now. The U.S., more than any other state, is expected to play a lead role in both offering support to Japan and pin the new Middle East. This is part of the cost of being a superpower.

It is easy, and perhaps even accurate to a degree to claim that this is not an either or situation and that we have to do both, as well as create jobs at home and, as the Republicans keep saying, cut taxes. Foreign assistance, after all, is not a significant part of the overall budget. There is, however, something disingenuous about this so cavalierly. Setting budget priorities is a major component of governance. If we are to become more sincere and effective about addressing chronic deficit problems and, indeed, about governance in general, we have to take these questions of setting priorities seriously. Refusing to commit American resources to Japan or the Middle East is not the solution, but committing resources to these crises without mobilizing public support and engaging the American people, and their elected representatives, in a conversation of the import of priorities and the complexity of budgeting, and hypocrisy of many self proclaimed budget hawks would be a lost opportunity.