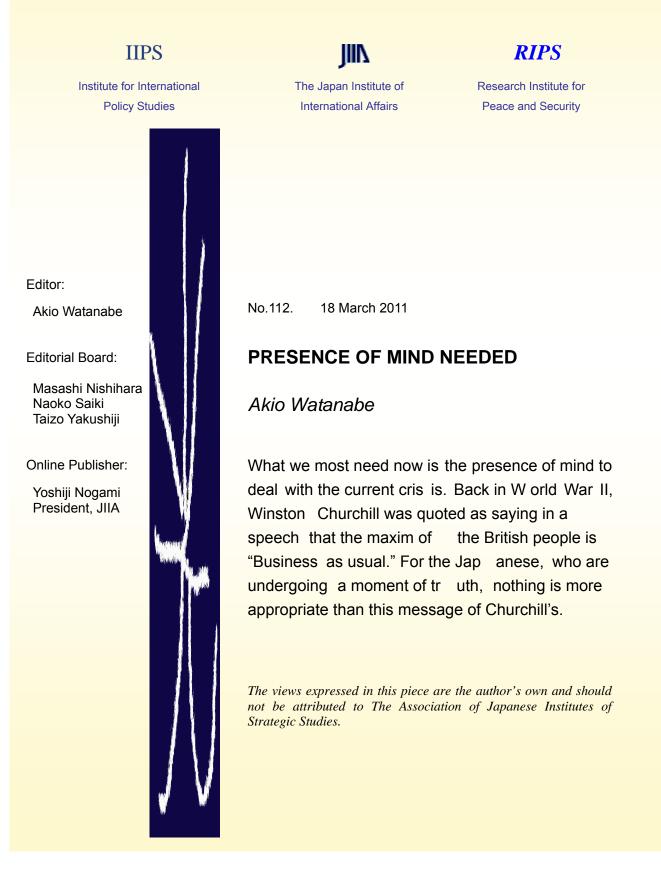
AJISS-Commentary

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The earthquake that struck off the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region at 2:46 p.m. on March 11 had an enorm ous magnitude of 9.0. The quake not only devastated buildings, roads, an airport and the rail syst em, but also triggered a tsunami that engulfed people with an intensity that went well beyond the estimate of Tohoku residents along the Pacific coast, who historically have experienced numerous tsunamis. At the time of writing, more than 15,000 people are dead or missing – a number that surp asses the death toll of the Kobe-A waji Earthquake, which took the lives of 6,000 people 17 years ago, and that of the Isewan Typhoon, which killed more than 5,000 people 62 years ago.

What is unprecedented in the history of natural disasters is the fact that the quake has caused massive damage to nuclear reactors in Fukushima Prefecture and that, despite all-out efforts to minimize the damage, no one is yet sure how far the destruction will extend. People throughout Japan, and not just those living around the nuclear power plant, are breathlessly keeping their eyes on ever-changing developments.

It is thus no wonder that the worl d's attention is focused on the possible nuclear crisis. This is attested to by the fact that English-language newspapers are using the Japanese term "Fukushima Daiichi" in describing the nuclear power plant. Howev er, it is regret table that some of their report s lack balance and pose the danger of provoking ex cessive responses, as have of ten been caused by news report s describing events in distant areas. It has been reported that alarmed foreigners have al ready left the Tokyo metropolitan area, with some even having evacuated from Japan. These report s are having negative effects on foreign exchange and stock markets. The concern of people here and abroad is underst andable. Yet the Japanese government, people and companies should keep their presence of mind and do what they have to do, which will enable Japan as a whole to maintain order and dignity and to get over this difficulty. This will not only serve the Jap anese people, but should also contribute to minimizing the negative im pact of the earthquake and the tsunami on the world economy. On top of everything, we must be careful not to stir up excessive anxiety. I am keen to remind opinion leaders here and abroad of this point.

On the other hand, harsh criticis m of the lack of awareness and shortcomings in the crisis management cap acity of the institutions in charge of Japan's nuclear energy polic y, including T okyo Electric Power Comp any (TEPCO), is necessary, even if the ear thquake was of a once-in-a-millennium scale. One lesson we must learn from this cr isis is the invalidity of the "myth of safety." The myth of safe ty is the belief that a dange rous situation will nev er happen and should not be allowed to happen. No belief is more removed from the principle of crisis management than this. A crisis will "occur" no matter how perfect the measures t aken in advance are, and we must be prep ared for the worst-case scenario. The presence of mind in the face of a crisis to deal with the situation and the principle of crisis management are two sides of the same coin.

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