

History: Ill-advised leaders incite political peril

Since the era of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, politics has been ruled by three representative forms of government — tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. The Persians accepted tyranny by irresponsible monarchs, the Spartans favored oligarchy by wanton aristocrats and the Athenians opted for democracy by pursuing pure self-government.

Those systems of government eventually failed. Assessing those debacles, the Greek philosopher Plutarch, who lived between 45 A.D. and 120 A.D. — about five centuries after Herodotus — wrote that the irresponsible form of govern-



INSIGHTS
into the
WORLD

By Masayuki Yamauchi

ment in a tyrannical state breeds violence, the presumptuous nature of oligarchy engenders arrogance, and equality in a democracy induces anarchy.

Indeed, the history of the world has many cases of imprudent and ill-advised politicians emerging, leading to the adoption of extreme postures and policies, often setting off political crises.

Northeast Asia's 3-way analogy

Plutarch's assessment essentially holds true for countries in Northeast Asia today.

The ruthless dictatorship by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been pushing the situation on the Korean Peninsula closer to the brink of war with his reckless military provocation by conducting ballistic missile and nuclear tests.

The Chinese leadership dominated by President Xi Jinping and other oligarchical elites of the Chinese Communist Party has kept arrogantly ignoring international calls to respect the rule of law in the East and South China seas and has repeatedly carried out intrusions into the territorial waters and land of other countries. On the other hand, Beijing has been tolerant of Pyongyang's missile and nuclear development programs for years to the extent that the North has been ultimately allowed to amass military power that now poses a threat even to the security of China itself.

In Japan, a country with a conspicuous tendency of valuing egalitarianism and absolute pacifism as a supreme goal of government, there recently emerged a group of political parties and citizens pressing ahead with anarchic thoughts of rejecting the updating of the country's security-related laws. Nonetheless, the urgency of asking ourselves as a nation and citizens how we should confront the threat from North Korea has brought about a new development on the political front. The Democratic Party, which spearheaded the vigorous but unsuccessful opposition to the Diet's passage of the new security legislation in 2015, has just recently broken up, opening

space for fresh debate on how to deal with the North's threat in the ongoing campaign for the Oct. 22 general election of the House of Representatives.

Middle East analogy

The three-way classification of forms of government also holds good for the Middle East, the area both Herodotus and Plutarch focused on in their studies of history. It is particularly relevant to Russia, Iran and Turkey in relation to their involvement in Syria's civil war. The future of the complicated strife in Syria depends on the three countries.

Russian President Vladimir Putin hews to the brutality and secretiveness of Soviet-era communism and the KGB. Against the backdrop of his "dictatorial" stance, Moscow has kept U.N.-orchestrated peace negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition forces stalled. Instead, sticking to a form of Eurasian geopolitics unique to him, Putin has not given up on his urge to expand Russia's interests in the Middle East.

The oligarchical system in Iran, which has remained in place despite discord surfacing from time to time between supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani, has successfully enlarged areas under Tehran's influence. Those areas can be likened to the "Arc of the Crescent" stretching from Tehran to Baghdad to Damascus and on to the Mediterranean coastal cities of Tartus, Syria, and Beirut.

In Turkey, parliamentary democracy has been maintained for a long time, a rare case of the rule of law being established in the Middle East. However, Turkey's democracy of late has seen President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's long-term rule increasingly generating populism and mob rule.

There is a distinct difference between the Northeast Asian crisis spawned in North Korea and the Syria-centered crisis in the Middle East. Now armed with nuclear weapons and medium- and long-range ballistic missiles, the North has overcome its military disadvantage based on conventional weaponry. It is now thought to be capable of launching a preemptive surprise nuclear attack at least once.

Israel's preemptive strategy

Vipin Narang, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a nuclear strategy specialist, defines cases of a nuclear threat by conventionally weak countries against more powerful ones as the doctrine of "asymmetric escalation." This strategy was adopted by France against the Soviet Union during the Cold War and later by Pakistan against India.

In the Middle East, however, neither Israel, which is widely believed to possess a nuclear arsenal, nor Iran, which is suspected to retain nuclear aspirations, have openly threatened to attack other countries with nuclear

weapons. At present, as the so-called threat of state works in the Middle East to control the possession and development of nuclear arms, no countries in the region are faced with the same dilemma as North Korea, which could use its nuclear weapons only to then be destroyed.

For its part, Israel has never officially admitted or denied its possession of nuclear arms, while it maintains a no-tolerance policy toward any move by other countries in the Middle East to develop missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons. In fact, it has thwarted such countries with air raids and on-site sabotage.

On Sept. 7, in the northwestern Syrian city of Masyaf, Israeli warplanes attacked a military facility that is run by the government of President Bashar al-Assad and is said to produce missiles. The bombing was reminiscent of Israel's sophisticated strategic operations to strike uranium-enrichment facilities in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007. The recent preemptive assault is meant to warn that Jerusalem would never let Iran, a supporter of the Assad regime and an archfoe of Israel, build facilities to develop advanced weapons in Syria.

Citing Benjamin Franklin's famous adage, Amos Yadlin, who headed Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman) from 2006 to 2010, wrote to *The New York Times* on Sept. 8: "Israel knows the bitter truth of the phrase 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.' Deciding to take action before it is absolutely necessary is not easy, but Israel's experience proves that it is far better in the long-term to confront budding threats rather than nuclear ones."

The United States and Japan are now vexed with the North's nuclear threat perhaps because

they used to be nonchalant about the essence of this teaching.

Rules still working

Despite its determination to take preventive action against potential threats, even Israel did not dare to conduct military operations against Iran to directly strike the regional power's nuclear facilities with a view to removing a strategic threat from Tehran. The reason that the United States and Japan have chosen to continue to push to the limit a series of economic sanctions against North Korea is quite similar to why Israel cautiously avoided attacking Iran.

In attacking the North, now armed with nuclear weapons, or Iran, equipped with sophisticated nuclear facilities, it would practically be difficult to follow Israel's experience of easily hitting the experimental nuclear reactors in Iraq and Syria.

It is worth paying attention to how Russia, which backs the Assad regime and has an intensive network of air defense systems in Syria, reacts to Israeli military operations.

For example, why did Russia take no action on Sept. 7 to prevent Israel's jets from carrying out their surprise attack on Masyaf, which is undoubtedly covered by the Russian

air defense network? In the Mediterranean naval port of Tartus, the Russian military has deployed S-400 air defense missiles with a maximum range of 400 kilometers — putting Israel, Turkey and Iraq within their reach. Given this fact, Moscow is presumed to have understood beforehand that the Israeli strike against the Syrian site was meant to be a warning to Iran, not an operation against Russia.

These actions and the responses to them make it clear that certain rules still continue to work among the countries concerned. They understand one another's warnings and restrain themselves from excessive responses even while countries within and without the region keep pursuing their national interests and occasionally engage in power games. Such phenomena may be uniquely characteristic of the Middle East, where rival countries exist so close to one another not only geographically but also geopolitically.

New Middle East map?

However, a new change has just begun in the Middle East. In a referendum held in northern Iraq in late September, 92 percent of voters called for independence from Baghdad. Their decision may result in the replacement of the Middle East's existing map.

If Kurds living in Syria and Turkey reinforce their own campaigns for autonomy, the repercussions would not be limited to enraging the central governments in Ankara and Damascus. It is unlikely that the push by Iraqi Kurds for separation and independence from Iraq will succeed any time soon. Nevertheless, the Middle East will have to brace for signs of new strife that may drastically reshape the existing regional order, depending on the new geopolitical situation surrounding the Kurdish people.

Such a drastic development is likely to occur if the Iraqi Kurdish population's efforts to win international understanding for the legitimacy of their independence aspirations, now amplified by the separation referendum, merges with separatist movements by Syria's Kurdish rebels — who, with the support of the United States, fought the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) — and Turkish Kurds. If this is the case, the Middle East will inevitably face a new geopolitical challenge.

An ancient dictator who lost hegemony lamented his ill-fated life by saying, "You have enraged my wrath and are now trying to reduce me to ashes." North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been taking advantage of U.S. President Donald Trump's words against him to escalate his military provocations. There are many aspects of the Middle East situation that should be learned to avoid an accidental war in Northeast Asia.

Special to *The Yonjuri Shimbum*

Yamauchi is a professor at Meiji University and a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, where he used to head the University of Tokyo Center for Middle Eastern Studies (UTCMES). Recently he was a member of the governmental panel of experts tasked from October 2016 to April 2017 with discussing measures to reduce the Emperor's burden of official duties.