

# A major war could break out before we know it

“The waterways from Nihombashi in Edo [now Tokyo] seamlessly connect all the way to China and even to the Netherlands.”

This was an aphorism written in the latter half of the Edo period (1603-1867) by Hayashi Shihei, a thinker concerned with governance and public welfare, in his book “Kaikoku Heidan” (A Discussion of the Military Defense of a Maritime Nation). In fact, the sea connects Japan to the world, not just China and the Netherlands.

As indicated by Hayashi’s theory of maritime defense, the storm caused in the Black Sea by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine ultimately triggered strong winds and high waves in the Strait of Hormuz. It has also begun stirring up waves in the Taiwan Strait. Perhaps not since the end of World War II have there been so many wars occurring simultaneously around the world.

The United States, in particular, is in a de facto state of war in seven countries, including through anti-terrorism campaigns, and in two seas.

The seven countries are Iran, Venezuela, Yemen, Syria, Nigeria, Somalia and Iraq. At sea, the United States is engaged in counter-drug maritime policing operations in the Caribbean Sea and a counter-blockade in and around the Strait of Hormuz.

What’s more, Russian President Vladimir Putin has deployed nuclear warheads to Belarus, while U.S. President Donald Trump has threatened to bomb Iran back to the Stone Age by attacking power plants and oil refineries. Iran, too, is threatening to destroy water desalination facilities in Gulf states.

Undeterred by the fear of crossing the final line and threatening the general public’s right to life, these parties stubbornly insist on acting unilaterally. There seems to be no one around these leaders to admonish them for their cowardly behavior. As quoted in Plutarch’s “Moralia,” the Spartan king Archidamus would sigh and lament: “Great Heavens! Man’s valor is no more!”

Ten years ago, I published a Japanese-language book titled “Chuto Fukugo Kiki kara Daisanji Sekai Tiasen e” (From the Middle East’s Polycrisis to World War III) with a particular emphasis

on three main points.

First, severe regional conflicts are not simply wars between two nations; rather, as seen in the Middle East, they tend to easily draw in neighboring countries and major powers, evolving into “polycrisis” that extend beyond the region.

Second, the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, compounded by the interests of major powers such as the United States, Russia and China regarding energy resources, religion, sec-



Yamauchi is a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, where he previously headed the school’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and a special visiting professor at the Mohammed V University of Rabat in Morocco. He was a professor at Musashino University in Tokyo from 2018 to 2023.

tarianism and ethnicity, harbor the potential to escalate into World War III.

Third, it is highly likely that there would not be an immediate all-out war but, rather, something close to a situation in which matters worsen to the extent that people find themselves in a major war “before they know it.” That is what happened with the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece and World War I.

This risk is growing, as more and more leaders of major powers prefer to resort to warfare as a means to settle political disputes.

## Preference for war

When the United Kingdom and France invaded Egypt’s Suez Canal zone in 1956, then U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower made the two countries withdraw. In 1962, then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev conceded to U.S. President John F. Kennedy, ending the Cuban Missile Crisis, which occurred due to the Soviet Union’s construction of missile bases in Cuba.

During the Cold War, strategic thinking to prevent localized wars that could potentially trigger a nuclear war was still alive among the world’s leaders.

Compared to their Cold War predecessors, both Trump and Putin lack strategic thinking pertaining to war and peace. Trump has changed the purported purpose of the war with Iran three times. When the war was launched on Feb. 28, he said the offensive was aimed at preventing Tehran’s nuclear development and nuclear armament. Then, on March 1, he cited regime change in Iran as the war’s objective, following the assassination of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and others. Since then, his top priority has been opening the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has closed.

The war with Iran was launched at the strong urging of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Doesn’t Trump know the story of the reckless decision by Russia’s then monarch, Nicholas II, to enter the Russo-Japanese War, which ended with Russia’s defeat? His decision was based on advice that winning a little war with Japan would be enough to impede the momentum for revolution in his country.

Trump and Netanyahu likely wanted to create public opinion favorable for their respective elections this autumn: a legislative election in Israel and midterm elections in the United States. But they aren’t satisfying the high demand of their supporters — namely, a complete victory in the war with Iran.

David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Rabin and other past Israeli prime ministers didn’t desire war without good reason. However, Netanyahu has chosen to keep Israel on a “permanent war” track in order to escape corruption and scandal charges. He has created so-called security zones in Syria, southern Lebanon and Gaza while pressing ahead with West Bank settlement expansion in the Palestinian autonomous territory without hesitating to engage in daily armed clashes. The Spartan king Agis was quoted in Plutarch’s “Moralia” as saying, “He who would rule over many must fight with many.” Netanyahu may be the only one who finds comfort in those words.

On the other hand, Iran’s Islamic political system is not simply a dictatorship protected in a unilateralist manner by a group of elite religious figures and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard

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Corps. Iran is also the international center of the Shiite Revolution, with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria defending the outer lines of the Iranian border.

That is why Iran includes Lebanon in its ceasefire negotiations with the United States — to keep Israel in check. Iran refuses to give up its “permanent revolution” for expanding the Shiite arc of influence, which was launched by the late Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Even if the United States and Iran reach a full-scale ceasefire, I don’t think reconciliation between Iran and Israel is possible.

This unwavering resolve — which shows no regard for the global surge in oil prices or the hardships faced by ordinary citizens resulting from the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz — stems fundamentally from the radical nature of Iran as a nation of permanent revolution. Therefore, the Middle East’s polycrisis needs to be examined from a strategic perspective that takes the interrelationship and simultaneity of wars in various places into consideration.

Let’s examine China’s diplomatic strategy and President Xi Jinping’s intentions regarding Trump’s visit to China in May, using a timeline as a framework.

Just prior to Trump’s China visit, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and North Korean

leader Kim Jong Un. Just after Trump left Beijing, Putin visited China. As a result, Trump’s visit to China ended up being sandwiched between those diplomatic events. It is clear from those developments that Xi has paid attention to strategic cooperation and supply problems with oil, food and weapons in preparation for a situation in which the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East lead to “a major war before one knows it.”

Xi is mindful of details, too. Immediately prior to Trump’s visit to China, Xi invited Cheng Li-wun, head of Taiwan’s Kuomintang Party, to China, telling domestic and international audiences that Taiwan is part of China.

During the U.S.-China summit, Xi demanded that the United States call off a \$14 billion U.S. arms sale to Taiwan. The United States temporarily suspended the arms sale, saving face for Xi. Nevertheless, the United States is quite unlikely to give up profits for the U.S. industrial-military complex.

In his talks with Trump, Xi criticized Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi by name, but Trump reportedly defended Takaichi, praising her leadership. Xi’s attempt to create a rift in the Japan-U.S. alliance therefore appears to have ended in failure.

In any case, the First Island Chain, which stretches from the South China Sea to Taiwan, Okinawa and mainland Japan, is a natural obstacle for China. It restricts the movement of strategic materials, such as imports of crude oil from the Middle East, and the freedom of the Chinese Navy to sail into the Western Pacific.

Just as with the oil resources around the Senkaku Islands, China will eventually harbor ambitions for the rare earth deposits off Minami-Torishima Island. From a strategic standpoint, the joint development plan for rare earth mud off the Island, agreed on by the Japanese and U.S. governments, is appropriate.

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