

## Japan needs far-reaching Eurasian strategy (1)

By YAMAUCHI Masayuki

U.S. President George W. Bush's Iraq War venture in the Middle East, an area known as the "Sea of Trouble," is reminiscent of a passage in "The Seven Against Thebes," a mythical narrative, written by Greek dramatist Aeschylus on the tragic destiny of the city.

The United States, which has been suffering heavy casualties in Iraq, has offered a stern warning about the dangers stemming from Iran's nuclear ambitions and Syria's support for terrorism. Washington appears to hold Tehran primarily responsible for the chaos in Iraq and appears to have drawn up contingency plans for launching an air raid on Iran if it is confirmed to be involved in nuclear weapons development.

The deepening of the Middle East crisis was the underlying reason for the United States' decision to make substantial concessions to North Korea in the six-party talks on Pyongyang's nuclear development program. An unholy alliance between Iran and North Korea over nuclear development means Japan cannot claim that the issue is not within its purview. The United States, for its part, has not been acting in concert and consistently over this particular issue. With this in mind, Japan now has to draw up a new Eurasian strategy.

### <Internal strife>

In the Middle East, the crisis is being compounded by the intensification of sectarian confrontations within Arab and Muslim groups, which have exacerbated the already bitter sentiment felt toward the United States and Israel. In Iraq, for instance, "fratricide"--killing one's kin--has continued unabated between the Muslim factions of Shiite and Sunni in Iraq. Sectarian cleansing is also under way there, and is being carried out in much the same way as ethnic cleansing in forcing residents to leave their homes and workplaces through terrorist attacks and other forms of intimidation.

In the Palestinian territories, members of Hamas and Fatah have exchanged gunfire even over turf wars, contributing to uncertainty over the future of the new coalition government, which comprises members of both factions. In Lebanon, tensions remain high as Hizbollah--which, in effect, created a state within a state--and pro-Syria Lebanese are at odds with the central government.

Can the nihilistic use of suicide bombings and murdering the followers of the same religion surely be in line with the teachings of the Koran, which attach importance to mercy and affection? It is also noteworthy that the people in other Arab and Islamic countries remain silent

about the fratricide in Iraq, a contrast to the violent furor over a Danish paper's cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed and Pope Benedict XVI's comments about the Islamic concept of Holy War.

When you realize the depth of the divisions within the Arab world and the lack of awareness of responsibility, the common notion that the establishment of an independent Palestinian state would help ease tension in the Middle East looks less convincing.

**<Iraq must come first>**

In addition, finding a solution to the Palestinian issue now appears to have been complicated by the emergence of Iran as a political factor since last year's battle in Lebanon.

The post-Iraq war sea change in the situation along the Fertile Crescent, which stretches from the Gulf coast to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, reflects the growing influence of Shiites and Shiite-run Iran.

What would please Iran would be the installation of an impregnable Shiite-dominated political regime in Iraq, while Sunni Arabs and Israeli troops continued fighting in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon. In other words, Tehran does have influence, though it is sometimes hidden, over Washington's policy on the three biggest issues in the Middle East--Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. As a consequence, Israel and other Arab countries have a common interest--at least for the moment--as they feel increasingly threatened by Iran.

Even the United States has no sword like that wielded by Alexander the Great to resolve the chaos in the Middle East, which seems as impossible to untangle as the Gordian knot. What is important, therefore, is to prioritize the issues in the Middle East that must be resolved. This means that as the day-to-day tragedy in Iraq is worse than the unfortunate situation in the Palestinian territories, Iraq should come first. (Continued)

**(This is the text of an article by Mr. YAMAUCHI Masayuki, Professor of Tokyo University, which was originally posted in "Daily Yomiuri" on March 4, 2007.)**