Arms race without end

The world continues to be racked by wars and armed conflicts. When we open a world map, we are reminded that wars are raging in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine (especially Gaza), Somalia, Sudan (especially Darfur), and the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, creating a swath of destruction from Asia to Africa. If we add to these “visible wars” the “invisible threat” of the “war against terror” in which anything could happen anywhere at any time, we can indeed say that the world is experiencing an era fraught with fear and insecurity.

In response to these outspread threats, military expenditures have increased unabated throughout the world. In recent years, military budgets have shown double-digit growth in much of East and South Asia, clearly indicating that the contest to scale up military means is under way. A recent economic analysis on worldwide anti-terrorism measures estimates world aggregate expenditures for homeland security since the 9-11, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to be approximately 200 billion dollars (20 trillion yen) per year, which is more than 20 times Japan’s official development assistance budget in recent years.²

In the financial sector, economic growth in the US has stagnated primarily due to the unexpectedly widespread defaults on subprime loans in the US, aggravating the sense of insecurity regarding the functioning of the global financial system. Under the current financial system, it is unlikely that the subprime issue will lead to a worldwide depression such as that of the 1930’s, if proper state intervention is made and successful international collaboration is realized. Nonetheless, we now must face up to the reality that our convenient way of life and pursuit of profit capacitated with a simple click of the mouse rely on a surprisingly vulnerable global financial system.

Domestic poverty brought to the fore by the subprime issue

Today, we see the insecurity of livelihood and employment due to poverty and inequality throughout the world, and it has become a matter of public knowledge that there exists a seriously impoverished class within the US, the world’s...
leading military and economic superpower. In Japan, the subprime issue is often translated as the “low-income housing loan” issue, describing that it is about the crisis triggered by the housing loans with eventually higher interest rate for low-income families, largely African Americans, in the disparity-friendly (lopsided-wealth-accumulation-friendly, in other words) environment of the US. It reflects the problems of poverty in that country where many people are unable to gain the basic amenities of life such as decent housing.

Insecurity due to terrorism, insecurity of market economy, and insecurity of livelihood due to poverty. These various forms of insecurity, or the condition that is not safe, that are generated from the present-day international political and economic situation make us think how we should interpret them and delineate an outlook of the world in which we can live and move freely with safety.

What needs to be emphasized in such an intellectual exercise is to think about the interconnections between phenomena that are otherwise seen to manifest independently and categorized into different domains, fields or categories, in a broader context.

Political use of the term “terrorism”

Let us take the “war on terror” as an example. It is a matter of grave concern that the term “terrorism”, which is widely-used with a decisive influence, has been defined and used arbitrarily by the superpower like the US, which is quite open about its intention to maintain and reinforce its economic and military dominance in the current world order. A recent case in point is Hamas which is labelled as a “terrorist organization” by the US and Israel. Branded as such, Hamas is excluded from being considered to be a participant in political dialogues. Israel seems to be convinced that the only way to protect its people from its neighbours is to isolate them behind a concrete wall several meters high.

Hamas won a resounding victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, and even cooperated with moderates to form a unified cabinet. But Israel and the US have been firmly taking the stance that they would not negotiate with a terrorist organization under any circumstance, thus ignoring the government which was elected democratically by the people.

I would like to address remarks made by Mr. Fumiaki Hagi of the Tokyo Shimbun Cairo bureau. Referring to the question of who is Hamas, Mr. Hagi presents a remarkably clear analysis on the obscene use of the term “terrorism.” It has been widely accepted that the main reason that the US treats Hamas as a “terrorist organization” is because Hamas refuses to recognize the right of Israel to exist. Mr. Hagi, however, interprets this differently with due consideration of Hamas’ position in the context of power relations. He writes as follows:

“It is only natural that Israel refuses to negotiate with Hamas, but it is also certain that Hamas will never officially recognize Israel’s right to exist. Hamas’ call for the ‘destruction of Israel’ is an article of faith rather than a realistic political
objective. That is why Hamas called for a permanent ceasefire based on the idea of co-existence of two states. There was room for compromise, but the US deliberately ignored it.”

Today, firmly believing that the justness of its “war on terror” is recognized by the US and the rest of the world, Israel continues its starvation tactics against the people of Gaza under the Hamas control, and as the result, anticipates Hamas’ self-destruction.

But Mr. Hagi foresees a different scenario unfolding:

“Continued attacks on Gaza weaken Hamas temporarily. But Hamas is the people and the ideology of resistance itself. As long as the occupation continues, Hamas will continue to proliferate. Therefore on the long term, poor visibility continues for the US.”

Such perspective on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict elucidates the logic of those who get shoved in the corner, the logic to which we are rarely exposed, since media reports tend to prioritize the interests of rich audience in rich countries.

The reason why there is no sign of success in military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan, which is labelled as a “terrorist group” not worthy of any dialogue, and the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia in a proxy war waged by the Ethiopian military on behalf of the US is partially due to the fact that these groups have been granted a certain level of recognition by the local people.

Read the global situation from a perspective beyond the framework of development assistance

It is essential to understand the issues of global poverty in the international political and economic context in connection with related phenomena, without cutting it off from the surrounding context.

This year the media have drawn unprecedented attention to the impoverished masses in Africa and other developing countries as the Fourth Tokyo International Conference on Africa and Development (TICAD IV) and the G8 Summit meeting were held in Japan.

At a time when a new global citizenry is emerging, it is a welcome trend that citizens of rich countries are starting to search for some sort of engagement with the issues of poverty outside their own wealthy “northern” countries. However, it is crucial not to reduce the issue of “poverty alleviation” merely to the issue of development assistance. It is vital that we make efforts to be aware of the global political and economic mechanisms that create poverty.

For instance, it has been propounded that, in addition to the development assistance to the world’s “bottom billion”, Japan should make more efforts to grant easier access to export to the “North” for the “South.” This no doubt deserves good attention, but it should be stressed that what is essential is to re-examine the issues of the “bottom billion” in the global political and economic context as mentioned above.
This is because the “bottom billion” are not merely poor due to economic condition in the “South.” They are closely related to the working poor of the “North” as victims of structural violence of the current global political and economic order. In a global context the rethinking of the freedom, self-reliance and dignity of these people must be done, and such rethinking is an agenda item for peace study which must not be overlooked.

Article 9 as a means for international peace

This issue of “PRIME,” like the previous issue, focuses on discussion on Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution from a global perspective, and throws light on how, in the present global context, Japan can make the right choice for a better world and for the future of our children. It is noteworthy that heightened public concerns for Japan’s “international contributions” have helped to invigorate Japanese citizen’s activities in Africa and Asia on various issues such as poverty, human rights, the environment and post-conflict rehabilitation. However, it would be a matter of great concern, if there is a tendency to disregard the appreciation and further study of the Japanese Constitution which clearly states the basic principles that give substance and direction to Japan’s “international contributions” or to be content with paying undivided attention on single issues without clarifying one’s stance as a citizen. In fact, if we become content with being self-contained with respective specialized civic activities and neglect to heed the the steady moves to sway public opinion and prepare for the procedures for revising Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution so that Japan can take military action with the US anywhere in the world, it would mean that we are abandoning the attempt to understand the interconnectedness of the world’s problems in the global and economic context as mentioned earlier.

Another special topic in the current issue is papers on the “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” that was adopted in the fall of 2007. Over the years, the International Peace Research Institute has continued research on this issue as part of its agenda for peace studies. It is a topic to which we hope to pay close attention continuously. As an active engagement with the issue, we are planning, for instance, to conduct a study tour to indigenous communities during the 2008 academic year.

With this issue, the special series on “Article 9 in the world” comes to a close. But I sincerely hope that various people worldwide will have a chance to read our English edition and share their response in “PRIME” in the latter half of the 2008 academic year.

Footnotes:
(1) Furthermore, it states that outcomes for the most part have not been commensurated with the expenditures.
(3) Tokyo Shimbun, evening edition, 7 July 2008
(4) The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It. Paul Collier, Oxford University

(4) Please refer to the back issues, No.11, No.12, and No.14 of “PRIME.”