

By Mohammad Mazhari

# Power is notoriously distributed unevenly: Japanese scholar

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International



TEHRAN – Pointing to the violence as one of the means that humans are utilizing to achieve their goals, a Japanese scholar says “in the international arena, power is notoriously unevenly distributed.”

“Contemporary states that may be internally characterized by their ‘democratic’ regimes do resort to wars and other forms of large-scale violence beyond their borders,” Yasuyuki Matsunaga tells the Tehran Times.

The Japanese scholar also says democracies do not necessarily tend to bring about “public goods beyond their jurisdictions”.

“Much like liberal institutions, democracy may, at best, be good for those who can benefit from it. A certain group of democracies may benefit from their mutual relations and interdependencies,” the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies professor notes.

Following is the text of the interview:

**Q: What are the big centers of conflict and confrontation in Asia? Also, why does West Asia is witnessing hot developments while East Asia is calm?**

A: Conflicts manifest themselves in many different ways, at many different levels, and among many different groups and individuals. Conflicts also take many different forms. It is not the case that violent conflicts are the only ones that merit our attention. Wherever different individuals live side by side, and more importantly, wherever there are powerful people, there will inevitably be many conflicts. Fundamentally, conflicts are functions of power.

That said, however, there are marked differences in the ways conflicts emerge. From time to time, large-scale conflicts manifest themselves and cause long-lasting effects. These can happen anywhere. In East and Southeast Asia today, there are some hotspots such as Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar. It is not true that East Asia is calm, whereas the Middle East (West Asia) is in turmoil.

**Q: What are the main roots of wars in West Asia? Regional differences, geopolitical confrontations, or foreign meddling?**

A: The roots of devastating wars and long-lasting conflicts are often traceable to the particular historical encounters that a region has had with the rest of the world. In the case of modern Middle East (West Asia), the most salient roots of the long-lasting conflicts in the region cannot be separated from the experiences that many peoples in the region have had with European colonialism. A case in point is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Historically, the conflict in Palestine cannot be explained without reference to the British colonial policy. Nor can it be explained without taking into consideration the protection that the U.S. has extended to one side of the conflict ever since the mid-1960s. Similarly, it has to be recognized that sectarian conflicts in present-day Lebanon are modern phenomena. A series of encounters by the key local actors with European powers for the last two hundred years have significantly shaped the ways in which conflicts have manifested in present-day Lebanon. Different historical forces and trajectories have reshaped how different individuals are

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grouped together. The confessional sects in Lebanon today are modern—and, more importantly, political—constructions.

More recently, however, the roots of regional conflict—not only in the Middle East (West Asia) but everywhere in the world—have become much more complex. Tides of ideological awakenings from secular nationalisms to various formations of nativist backlashes, centripetal and centrifugal movements of political power in the form of national states, creeping infiltration of global capitalism and neoliberal governmentality, and massive infusion of weapons and other types of technological artifacts have combined to cause and perpetuate divergent forms of local and regional conflicts. Of course, age-old mechanisms of conflict such as personal and group rivalry, competition for resources, and human penchant for domination must be added to the list of frequent causes of conflicts of different scales. Less significant, in my view, are oft-mentioned deliberate schemes such as conspiracies and mischiefs. I tend to see conflicts emerging primarily from material and structural causes as well as historical contingencies.

**“Historically, the conflict in Palestine cannot be explained without reference to the British colonial policy.”**

**Q: What is your comment on Fukuyama's “end of history” theory? Could liberal democracy spread successfully in the world?**

A: I don't think so. Liberalism and liberal institutions of power are only good for those who can benefit from them. It is most likely true that collectively constructed and competitively maintained “liberal” institutions tend to fare better than arbitrarily established and easily manipulatable ones often put in place by autocrats. Yet there is no escaping the fact that liberalism tends not to challenge, and more

often than not serve, the status quo. If you happen to be on the receiving end of domination of some kind, liberal institutions will unlikely be a solution to the problems that you face. What Francis Fukuyama declared at the end of the Cold War was not for the sake of everyone. It seemed to his side of the people that they had just scored a big, albeit fleeting, victory.

There are also problems with the idea that some institutional arrangements—be they liberal or otherwise—can be “spread” or “exported” from one historical plateau to another. Each place has its own history. In other words, at the end of the day, lasting things in each historical location have to be developed from within its own historical trajectory. Certain technical ideas and institutional arrangements may be shared, or passed around, among differently situated historical communities. But there won't be any universal panacea in human history.

**Q: Do you think democracy can prevent wars? We have countries that claim they are democratic while they have waged the most destructive wars.**

A: Much like liberal institutions, democracy may, at best, be good for those who can benefit from it. A certain group of democracies may benefit from their mutual relations and interdependencies. But it does not mean that democracies tend to bring about public goods beyond their jurisdictions. Contemporary states that may be internally characterized by their “democratic” regimes do resort to wars and other forms of large-scale violence beyond their borders. It should not be any surprise. Democracy is a rule by a majority, who mostly likely be a minority in the big scheme of things. When a minority strives to maintain power over others, violence is one of the least complicated means that we humans tend to think of utilizing. In addition, in the international arena, power is notoriously unevenly distributed. There is a long way to go before we could eliminate war as a means to resolve international disputes.

**Q: How do you assess China's challenge to the U.S. and other Western powers? Is China going to be a hegemon after its economy becomes dominant in the world?**

A: China is already a military power. But being a hegemon is not simply the same as being a powerful country, be it economically or militarily. A hegemon is a “leader” that provides for public goods. What a hegemon does has to be seen legitimate for the very reason that it serves social purposes. In that sense, the jury is still out. For the moment, it does not appear that China will likely become the sole power in the world. At best, China may become a “leader” of a certain group of developing countries. In that scenario, to the extent that China successfully constructs a parallel set of “legitimate” global institutions, we may then start seeing a development of another Cold-War-type global competition between two rival groupings. But it won't be easy.

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