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Short Curriculum Vitae) Naoaki Okabe

Graduated from the School of Political Science and Economics, Waseda University in 1969. Joined the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* that same year, and after serving in roles such as reporter in the economics section held successive posts as a correspondent in Brussels, head of the New York branch office, executive director of the editorial board, special executive director, and columnist. Has held his current post since 2012. His major works have included *A Leaderless World*, *A Primer to the Japanese Economy*, and *Reciprocity: The Political Dynamics of the Yen and Dollar*.

Can a “Clever America” Change the World?

The Obama administration in the United States avoided a military intervention in Syria, which had used chemical weapons. This policy turnaround by the Obama administration, which had at one time clearly spelled out its stance on military intervention, has come under criticism claiming that the United States has strayed off course. It has been said that this has damaged the prestige of the United States and plunged the world further into turmoil. But is this really the case? Could not the case be made that the acceptance of Russia’s proposal to dispose of Syria’s chemical weapons under international management was not actually the choice of a “clever America”? If for example the United States were to intervene militarily in Syria under the banner of a “powerful America” then this would surely plunge not only the Middle East, but also the world at large, into immense chaos. Perhaps the global economy from five years after the financial crisis precipitated by the collapse of Lehman Brothers had been facing a new crisis. The United States’ choice hints at the possibility of a new type of international cooperation for a “leaderless era.”

Nonintervention in Syria Is the Pragmatic Choice

By the time that the Cameron administration in the United Kingdom, an ally of the United States, had passed on the notion of a military intervention in Syria due to opposition in parliament, it had already become apparent that the Obama administration would not intervene militarily in the country. It goes without saying that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable for humanitarian reasons.

The crimes of the Assad regime in Syria are severe. Yet at the G20 forum opposition to military intervention extended from newly emerging countries like Russia (which has deep ties with the Assad regime) and China, all the way to Germany. In point of fact, one would expect that the proposition of a single-handed military intervention by the United States would be unacceptable to not only international public opinion, but also public opinion within the United States. The US public had only just learned the lesson of what had ultimately been achieved by their interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The fact that President Obama set aside his presidential authority and asked Congress for a decision was a reflection of public opinion from inside and outside the United States. The view had been that from the outset Syria differed from the other Middle Eastern countries that were part of the “Arab spring” in that it had a long-running dictatorship that would not be easily toppled. Even among Japan’s diplomatic authorities the analysis was that given the rising influence of Russia and its deep ties with the Assad regime, it was inconceivable that the regime would collapse in the immediate future.

Russia’s proposal came as a godsend to the Obama administration. The Russian proposal achieved international consensus and succeeded in become a resolution by the United Nations Security Council. This was also a historical development for the non-functional United Nations. The pragmatic choice of the Obama administration concerning Syria also gave rise to the historically significant byproduct of dialogue between the United States and Iran. When President Rouhani visited the United States for the United Nations General Assembly he proposed a phone conversation with

President Obama, thus achieving a dialogue in the end. This caused widespread repercussions, such as Israel voicing its displeasure, but it was enormously significant in the sense that under President Rouhani, who is considered to be of a more liberal and enlightened school of thought, Iran has moved towards conciliation with the West. This was backed by a change concerning the state of affairs in Syria. Of course, weighty issues remain with the pragmatic choice of the Obama administration. There is the question of whether the disposal of chemical weapons under international management can be rigorously advanced as Syria's civil war continues. There is also the question of whether or not the mistrust of the international community can be dispelled when it comes to the issue of nuclear development by Iran, which is working towards conciliation with the West. Yet how would it have turned out if the Obama administration had taken the plunge of military intervention in Syria? Even if it restricted itself to air strikes it would have been unable to avoid the prolongation of the conflict once it had intervened. Of course, this would have taken conciliation with Iran off the table. It would have likely raised military tensions in the Middle Eastern region depending on how Israel reacted. US-Russian relations would have been strained further and it would have certainly deepened global turmoil. It would have almost certainly ushered in new causes for concern for the global economy, which has still not yet been able to extricate itself from crisis five years after the financial crisis, as evidenced by underlying changes in the price of crude oil for example.

Three Misunderstandings concerning Nonintervention

There are a number of different misunderstandings regarding the Obama administration's nonintervention in Syria. First is the view that perhaps this is the beginning of a "weak America" that evokes the former administration of Carter, who was a member of the Democratic Party. There is also the observation that it would lead to a weakening of the dollar. Yet the choice of the Obama administration was not that of a weak America; rather it could be said to be the choice of a clever America that directly faced up to the realities of international politics and the global economy.

The second misunderstanding is that this has lowered the prestige of the United States. Yet did "Bush's war" in Iraq, which evoked notions of a "powerful America," raise the

prestige of the United States? To say nothing of the inability to even substantiate proof of the existence of the weapons of mass destruction that were used as the pretext for starting the war, which greatly lowered the prestige of the United States. As such, it cannot be simply stated that the Obama administration's choice to not intervene in Syria damaged the prestige of the United States.

The third misunderstanding claims that the approach of the Obama administration seen with its nonintervention in Syria has produced tension in East Asia. To be sure, there are seeds of crisis throughout East Asia, such as the problem of nuclear development by North Korea, as well as China's incursions into ocean areas. There are also concerns that the United States' non-interventionism will give rise to a power vacuum in the region. But President Obama has clearly positioned the United States as an "Asia-Pacific nation," and it has made a clear pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region. As can also be seen from how it is throwing its enthusiastic efforts into the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), it is placing the utmost emphasis on this region.

Even as it is raising the alarm over China's incursions into ocean areas, the United States has been seeking out cooperation with China, which is the world's second largest economic power, through its US-China strategy and economic dialogue. It also has high expectations for China's role when it comes to the North Korean problem as well.

The Obama administration's nonintervention in Syria can also be seen as a reflection of the United States' pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region. This is all the more true given the potential that the United States has to decrease its dependence on the Middle East owing to its shale gas revolution.

If we were to suppose that it reached a situation where the United States' noninterventionism spread around the globe, then this could be viewed as a return to conventional isolationism. But surely this will not come to pass. Rather, this could be said to herald an era of "selection and concentration" on the Asia-Pacific region in the United States' economic and security strategies.

A New Type of Cooperation for a "Leaderless World"

As President Obama has said, the age when the United States could conduct itself as the “world’s policeman” is over. The economic might of the United States has declined in a relative sense due to the appearance of newly emerging countries like China. To be sure, it is unreasonable for the United States to bear responsibility for everything. A leaderless world requires a new type of international cooperation.

President Obama himself likely believes that “a world free of nuclear weapons” ought to be first and foremost in this international cooperation. It was for such appeals that he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. This is a weighty responsibility. First off, he must take the initiative in addressing the issue of nuclear development in North Korea and Iran. Nuclear disarmament between the United States and Russia has proceeded well enough, but further progress is crucial. The international community must once again request that China, which is the sole nation among the nuclear states to have continued the nuclear arms race, carry out nuclear disarmament.

The restoration of the role of the United Nations is also important. The UN Security Council resolution to dispose of Syria’s chemical weapons offered a glimpse of the new potential of the United Nations, which had fallen into dysfunction. Various different crises have been advancing forward as the major powers squabble with one another. The significance of the fact that the United Nations serves as a stage for bringing the major powers together to overcome crises has never been greater.

Working to prevent global warming is the joint responsibility of the major powers. There are reports that temperatures will rise by as much as 4.8°C by the end of this century. The United States and China bear a particularly heavy responsibility here in the sense that they account for 40% of greenhouse gas emissions. If they cannot come together on the stage of the United Nations then the earth’s future will be imperiled.

Japan will have an important role in a leaderless world. It must contribute to the prevention of global warming through its technology, such as by developing new energies and new energy conservation techniques in light of its nuclear crisis. As the only country to be the victim of a nuclear attack, Japan is responsible for ushering in a

“nuke free” world together with the United States.

Japan’s growth strategy is to give the utmost priority to working to improve relations with its neighbors, such as China and South Korea, and to contribute to the prosperity and stability of East Asia. The “proactive pacifism” advocated by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe must be “proactive international cooperation.”

Never has there been a greater need for a new type of international cooperation for a leaderless world than there is now.