

all > Editorial & Opinion

[Column] Lessons for Korea in the tragedy in Israel

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A strategy of unilateral pressure that relies on the possibility of North Korea imploding from the inside leads to angry pushback and could ultimately have disastrous consequences



Palestinians gather in an area in Gaza that has been reduced to rubble from Israeli air strikes on Oct. 9. (TASS/Yonhap)



By Moon Chung-in, Yonsei University professor emeritus

Ever since the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel has been a model for South Korea's national security. Despite Israel's struggle in the Yom Kippur War in 1973, it has managed to not only survive but also thrive, safeguarding democracy while being sandwiched between Arab states with a collective population of 300 million.

But the tragedy that struck on Oct. 7 — on Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest — flips that model on its head.

Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip fired off more than 5,000 rockets and invaded Israeli territory from land, sea and sky, brutally butchering over a thousand innocent civilians and injuring more than 2,400. Some 1,600 Hamas militants were killed in Israel's immediate reprisal and massive bombardment, and the number of Palestinian victims is swiftly rising.

Given Israel's determination to enact vengeance, the number of casualties in Gaza is likely to keep rising.

These are events of inconceivable horror. It's also hard to believe that Israel, with its world-class armed forces and intelligence service, could have been so humiliated not by a nation-state like Egypt, but by a militant organization.

The problem comes down to a failure of the intelligence community. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) misunderstood Hamas' intentions and underestimated its capabilities. The IDF likely concluded that Hamas would refrain from offensive activities to cement its political position in the Gaza Strip and had backed away from large-scale attacks for fear of robust retaliation from Israel. Reinforcing that supposition is the fact that the IDF relocated some forces stationed near the Gaza Strip to deal with unrest in Judea and Samaria.

When I visited Israel seven years ago, a member of the IDF explained that the effective operation of Israel's Iron Dome is only possible because Hamas' activities are monitored at all times through the integration of human intelligence, imagery intelligence and signals intelligence.

But that's now how things worked out this time. The fact that Hamas fired more than 5,000 of its Qassam rockets in a single day suggests that it's holding tens of thousands of rockets in reserve. It's hard to understand how both Mossad and Aman (Israel's military intelligence) failed to learn about such a huge number of rockets or preemptively eliminate them.

The Israeli government's hostile policy of pressuring the Palestinians played a role in all this. The Gaza Strip has a population of 2.2 million people despite being roughly the size of Sejong City — more densely populated than anywhere else in the world. And about half of Gaza residents are unemployed.

Furthermore, Israel has been blockading the Gaza Strip since 2007. That makes it impossible to enter or exit the area without passes issued by the Israeli government, which also controls access to water, electricity and food. Gaza has been described with no exaggeration as “the world's largest open-air prison.”

Israel's policy of pressuring and blockading Gaza has reinforced Hamas' political base, leading to grossly inhuman provocations such as the latest onslaught. That's the unfortunate outcome of imposing unilateral pressure without leaving a way out.

To be sure, it's not easy to negotiate with Hamas, a group that denies Israel's very right to exist. But if Israel had patiently sought a peaceful solution, it might not be in its current predicament.

Another aspect of the problem is a failure of politics. After barely cobbling together a conservative coalition government, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu embarked on the risky initiative in July of introducing legal reforms that would reduce the authority of Israel's judicial branch.

Netanyahu's reforms have provoked fierce opposition from the Israeli populace, including a series of protests that brought more than 300,000 people to the streets. In addition, more than 10,000 members of the IDF reserves declared they cannot serve under a government that is moving toward dictatorship, which has served to undermine military readiness. The political polarization and instability inside Israel likely incited Hamas' military adventurism.

Netanyahu is characterized by unrelenting arrogance and self-righteousness, and some members of his conservative coalition have called for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and argued that the Gaza Strip should be wiped off the face of the earth. As such, they surely bear some measure of responsibility for this tragedy.

The tragedy in Israel has a clear lesson for us here in Korea. We must not become overconfident in our intelligence community or our “three-axis” defense system. Pyongyang can always find a way to strike us through the cracks. A strategy of unilateral pressure that relies on the possibility of North Korea imploding from the inside leads to angry pushback and could ultimately have disastrous consequences.

North Korea is no ragtag band of militants — it's a genuine threat backed by a nuclear arsenal. And the divisive politics of branding anyone critical of the government as belonging to “anti-state forces” only erodes internal cohesion, with a toxic effect on national security. Our discord only empowers the forces that are hostile to us.

Preventing a war is more valuable than winning one. That prosaic truth is reconfirmed by the experience of Israel. If victory comes after the meaningless sacrifice of so many innocent lives, who was that victory for?

The most important lesson that the South Korean government can learn is to face up to reality and move beyond its high-handed and haughty insistence on achieving “peace through strength.”

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