All Things Fall Apart

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Not long ago, citizens of Seoul woke up to a piercing sound of alert that urged them to prepare for an evacuation. Soon the sirens went off in the streets, and Naver, the biggest and most widely used portal service in Korea, was down.

About ten minutes later, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety retracted the alert. It turned out to be a false alarm caused by the city of Seoul misinterpreting the Ministry's warning regarding North Korea's satellite launch for Baengneyongdo, the westernmost island area of South Korea near the demarcation line. While the incident raised quite a debate in Korea, ranging from the problematic nature of the national alert system to the sloppiness of its content (the alert did not contain any specific details or information),

it was also a brutal wake-up call to many Koreans, including myself, that Korea is indeed a country still at war.

Earlier on, the month of May also marked one year since President Yoon's inauguration. The Yoon administration highlighted progress in foreign policy as a key result of its first year. Indeed, the previous administration's strategic ambiguity was discarded as Yoon embarked on a clear path to "value-based diplomacy" emphasizing freedom and liberal democracy, visibly aligning Korea with the United States and taking giant strides toward thawing Korea-Japan relations. Yoon's projection of national security seems to depend on the strength of this trilateral alliance; he has openly promoted strengthening strategic cooperation among the three countries not just to deter North Korean aggressions but "also to solidify a free and open international order based on the rule of law". This rhetoric is echoed in the National Security Strategy published on June 8th, which quotes the U.S. National Security Strategy 2022 in describing the U.S.-China competition as "democracy versus authoritarianism." Yoon's reference to "clashes of values, ideas, and interests around the globe" in the preface seems to reflect the perspective that the world has now entered a New Cold War; it is the free world against the oppressive, those who respect the rule of law against those who don't.

This way of formulating international relations may be sound, in terms of ideology or philosophy. But it is hardly a wise approach to defending the peace and prosperity of a nation-state. As Francis Fukuyama famously declared, the end of the Cold War was often seen, with pride, as the end of history; democracy had won, and authoritarian regimes were but an anachronism. We now know that his audacious claim was far too naïve to be true. If there is a lesson to be learned from this, it is that this world is a complicated place that does not render easy or clear-cut solutions to its problems. The unipolar world with U.S. hegemony that became the norm after the Cold War seems to have reached its end as well. The world to come will likely be a multipolar one, and the dichotomous categorization of us against them, hard against soft power, one hegemon against another is no longer a relevant formula, albeit tantalizingly simple, to understand the international dynamics around us.

For ten minutes on the 31st of May, the threat of war—something our generation has never experienced—was real, felt in all of its panic, confusion, and fear. The rosy, post-Cold War depiction of the triumph of the West and liberal ideals soon gave way to what is deemed a "democratic recession," or even a "democratic crisis." What this clearly tells us is that there is no end to history, only an end to all things we once took for granted and assumed perpetuity. The hegemonic world order as we know it may be falling apart as well. The values we adhere to do not, and must not, change: freedom, peace, and prosperity, as is outlined several times in Yoon's National Security Strategy. But the way we define, pursue, and defend those values must be tactful and clever. It should engage and include, rather than dismiss and

antagonize. After all, the peace and well-being of the citizens are the basic conditions for a country's very existence.