

Turnaround in U.S. Strategic Perception (2): National Security Perception

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On August 15, shocking news that Afghanistan's Taliban militant group took control of Kabul and effectively returned to power made headlines around the world. The Afghan government collapsed, plunging Afghanistan into a chaos. As the United States that supported the Afghan government lost its prestige, the Biden administration's policy or strategy for pulling out U.S. forces from Afghanistan came under severe fire in the United States. In Afghanistan to which the United States gave strategic priority in its 20-year war against terrorism, the U.S. war achievements crumbled, forcing Washington to face a grim reality.

The U.S. war against terrorism stemmed from terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. A total of 2,977 people were killed in the attacks, including two hijacked airliners being flown into the twin World Trade Center buildings in New York that led to the buildings' collapse. The large-scale terrorist attacks on the U.S. nerve centers killed and injured numerous citizens, coming as a great shock to American society. Then U.S. President George W. Bush immediately declared a war against terrorism. Alleging that Afghanistan sheltered Osama bin Laden, then leader of the al-Qaeda international terrorist group, who was suspected to have orchestrated the terrorist attacks, the United States launched air strikes on the country in October 2001. U.S. forces then invaded Afghanistan and toppled the then Taliban regime. Later, the United States supported a new government headed by President Hamid Karzai, continuing efforts and engagement to democratize, reconstruct and stabilize Afghanistan. It spent an estimated \$2.3 trillion on Afghanistan in the two decades.

The United States expanded its war against terrorism. In 2003, it launched a military invasion into Iraq for the reason that Iraq supported international terrorism and possessed weapons of mass destruction. In the war in Iraq, the United States overthrew the then Saddam Hussein regime. Later, it continued initiatives to reconstruct, stabilize and democratize Iraq. In fact, however, Iraq remained in difficult and in some case chaotic situation. The Arab Spring movement and other developments accelerated the destabilization of the Middle East. Amid confusion and a power vacuum, the Islamic State terrorist group expanded attacks, while massive refugees came from the Middle East to Europe where terrorist attacks spread. The Middle East plunged into extreme confusion.

Twenty years after the United States launched the war against terrorism, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, the first battlefield of the war, leading people to renew the question of what the war against terrorism was. The 20-year war is estimated to have cost the United States more than \$8 trillion and killed more than 7,000 U.S. troops and nearly 400,000 civilians. The apparent reason the United States waged the war against terrorism even at such huge cost is that terrorism was perceived as the most serious threat to U.S. national security. The United States won the Cold War and became the world's only superpower in the 1990s as the Soviet Union collapsed. At a time when the United States had no rival, the terrorist attacks on the U.S. nerve centers came, prompting U.S. leader to perceive that the most serious threat to the United States were non-state

actors such as terrorist and other militant groups that should be a national security policy target. Such strategic perception drove the United States into embarking on the war against terrorism even at huge cost. In Afghanistan and the Middle East that became main battlefields of the war, the local situation has failed to be stabilized and remains plagued with various challenges. As the Middle East has remained the gravity center of international energy markets, the war against terrorism and its spillover impacts have continued to shake the region and the international energy situation.

While the United States sustained the war against terrorism, the international situation underwent a huge change. That is the rise of China. After keeping double-digit annual economic growth and increasing its presence as the factory of the world in the 2000s, China enhanced its political and geopolitical influence. Then, a confident China transitioned from the “hide your strength” approach in the Deng Xiaoping era to assertive diplomacy. Washington gradually became vigilant to China’s rise and toughened its China policy. After U.S.-China relations focused on a trade war in the first half of the Trump administration period, Washington enhanced its perception of China as a full-fledged challenger to U.S. supremacy and toughened its attitude against China amid the huge impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the second half.

In such situation, what policy or strategy on China Joe Biden would adopt attracted global interest after his victory in the November 2020 U.S. presidential election. Although some people had predicted the Biden administration to be more conciliatory to China, the new administration has come up with a tough China policy and has specifically given priority to winning competition with China. This is because the president, the federal government, Congressional Democrats and Republicans, military and national security circles and the establishment class shared a critical view on China. The Biden administration has also taken a more serious view of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region issues than the Trump administration, implemented a foreign policy strategy based on values such as human rights and democracy and given priority to enhancing strategic cooperation with U.S. allies in competing with China.

Behind the tough China policy, U.S. leaders might have shared a national security perception that China is a challenger to U.S. supremacy and the most serious challenge to U.S. national security. They may perceive that the key U.S. national security challenge has transitioned from a fight against non-state actors such as terrorist groups to a major power competition. To counter such U.S. transition and strategic response, Beijing is promoting an international strategy to deepen strategic cooperation with Russia facing difficult relations with the United States, enhance bilateral strategic relations in the Middle East, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa and drive wedges between the United States and its allies. In such international situation, geopolitical tensions are growing globally. In the world in which national security is given priority, competition over strategic commodities, resources and technologies is intensifying in regard to economic security and technological supremacy, exerting influence on the international energy situation and climate change countermeasures. The trend of prioritizing economic security is going in the direction of giving priority to energy security. As the world undergoes a new energy transition, policies and strategies to enhance energy security in such new situation are growing more important.

At a time when the United States is shifting its policy resources to enhancing its China strategy amid the major change in its national security perception, the Afghan situation has plunged into chaos. The United States now must look to fight against terrorism again while minimizing its impact on the major power competition. It has thus plunged into a difficult situation. While the U.S. Afghan strategy is coming under growing fire, its AUKUS initiative to enhance security relations with Australia and the United Kingdom is affecting its cooperation with France. The Biden administration is thus required to continue with difficult maneuvering regarding foreign policy and

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national security strategies. The shaking of the United States amounts to that of global order, becoming a grave international security problem.

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