

Turnaround in U.S. Strategic Perception (4): Climate Change Initiatives

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How the United States would address climate change is the most important and attention-attracting issue for considering U.S. and global energy issues. Since its inauguration, the Biden administration has positioned climate change as a crisis and a top priority rivaling COVID-19 and economic recovery. While pursuing extremely ambitious goals including the 2050 carbon neutrality and the 2035 zero-emission power sector that President Joe Biden has promised since his presidential election campaigns, the Biden administration has clarified its stance of positioning the United States as global leader of climate change initiatives and promoted efforts to lead international climate change discussions, including the comeback to the Paris Agreement from which his predecessor Donald Trump unilaterally decided to secede. In a symbolic action, President Biden sponsored a climate change summit last April, urging summit participants to substantially raise greenhouse gas emission reduction goals for 2030. He himself committed to cut U.S. GHG emissions in 2030 by 50-52% from 2005, substantially raising the Obama administration's goal of 26%.

In this way, the United States has rivaled the European Union in demonstrating an attitude of addressing climate change most proactively in the world, leading global discussions on the matter. In the past more than 20 years, however, U.S. climate change policy has dramatically changed on every regime change, failing to be consistent. When the Kyoto Protocol was agreed on as the first international climate change prevention framework under the Clinton administration in 1997, then Vice President Al Gore was viewed as having contributed to raising emission reduction targets and achieving the agreement. Then, however, U.S. Congress was little expected to approve the Kyoto Protocol. In March 2001, then U.S. President George W. Bush eventually offered to exit from the Kyoto Protocol, complaining that a GHG emission reduction target in the agreement would affect U.S. economic growth and that the agreement failed to require developing countries to cut emissions.

At that time, energy security became an urgent issue as crude oil price spikes coincided with a rise in U.S. dependence on oil imports. From September 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States led the war on terrorism and national security to become top priority. The United States' unilateralism emerged in the international arena. Given these developments, climate change failed to become a top priority for the United States under the Bush administration.

Under the Obama administration, however, the U.S. climate change policy direction turned around. Emphasizing opinions of liberals who contributed to developing presidential campaign promises for Barack Obama, the Obama administration gave priority to the concept of the Green New Deal that prioritized investment in renewable energy for recovery from the global financial crisis that was then a top priority. At the same time, the Obama administration emphasized the enhancement of climate change prevention measures based on international cooperation, participating proactively in discussions at the annual conference of parties to the U.N. Framework

Convention on Climate Change. Particularly, it focused on an international framework following the Kyoto Protocol, leading to the achievement of the Paris Agreement at the 23rd COP meeting in 2015. The Paris Agreement was the Obama administration's legacy regarding climate change.

However, the Trump administration that succeeded to the Obama regime implemented policies to reverse Obama legacies one after another. Typically, President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement. The Trump administration was seemingly skeptical of the climate change issue or any anthropogenic impact on climate, retaining a negative attitude on the climate change issue. Rather, it gave priority to a strategy to take advantage of sharp oil and gas production growth under the shale revolution to maximize U.S. national interests, as demonstrated by its Energy Dominance initiative. However, the basic policy of taking full advantage of the shale revolution had emerged in the second half of the Obama administration. While the Obama administration initially emphasized the Green New Deal initiative, the largest contributor to U.S. economic recovery from the global financial crisis turned out to be oil and gas, and the shale revolution. Understanding the reality, the Obama administration had given priority to taking maximum advantage of the oil and gas production growth in its second half of the term.

The present Biden administration positions climate change as one of the top priorities. The position of U.S. climate change policy swung every time when the presidency changed from Republican to Democrat, and vice versa. When the Biden administration replaced the Trump regime, the change was one of the most dramatic ones in history, shaking the world greatly. In the Trump administration period, the EU was the most positive towards climate change prevention, while the United States was negative. There was a kind of equilibrium between the EU and U.S. stances. As the United States became as positive as, or more positive than, the EU toward climate change prevention, however, the equilibrium collapsed, leading the entire world to enhance climate change countermeasures and get on the growing trend towards carbon neutrality. At the same time, the trend opened a Pandora's box to escalate the north-south confrontation that had been put on hold thanks to voluntary emission reduction initiatives as a key component of the Paris Agreement. The United States and the EU have taken leadership in enhancing climate change countermeasures and promoting carbon neutrality in a manner to encourage developing countries again to hold advanced economies responsible for climate change, complicating international climate negotiations.

Under the Biden administration, climate change is viewed as a crisis and one of the top priorities. The administration's climate change initiative is very proactive, particularly in diplomacy. As indicated by a down-to-earth analysis of the U.S. situation, however, the issue is not simple. There are various issues in the United States. The largest issue may be that the United States is divided. As symbolized by the distribution of Congressional seats between the Democratic and Republican Parties, U.S. public opinion is split in two. Some people still question the legitimacy of President Biden, claiming that the November 2020 presidential election was rigged. Complicating the situation is the fact that even within the Democratic Party, wide differences exist between environmentalists and moderates and between liberals and centrists. The party is not necessarily united, as indicated by the current Congressional stalemate over the debt limit as well as President Biden's priority infrastructure legislation to enhance climate change countermeasures. The emission reduction goal for 2030, the zero-emission power sector goal for 2035 and the carbon neutrality goal for 2050 could be realized only if relevant legislation is enacted, with budgeted policies implemented. Whether these goals could be achieved is uncertain. Ahead of the next midterm congressional election scheduled for November 2022, Democrat President Biden's approval ratings have remarkably declined due to the recent COVID-19 infection spread and his controversial

decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan. In the next midterm election, the Democrats could lose a majority to the Republicans. Historically, congressional seats have declined for governing parties in midterm elections. Even within the Democratic Party, policy discussions could change toward the next midterm election. We must closely watch how U.S. policies would develop.

Given that the United States is a giant market economy, we may make a misjudgment if we are preoccupied with federal government policies and their impacts alone. State energy and environmental policies as well have great influence. In addition, business initiatives and strategies impose huge influence on the U.S. energy situation and climate change countermeasures. We must accurately understand the future trends of key actors that drive the United States exerting great influence on the world.

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