

## **Reviewing the First Year of President Biden**

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At a time when the possibility of Russia's invasion into Ukraine that is growing tense is looming as a grave global issue, the responses of the United States that holds the key to global governance are attracting global attention. The Ukraine crisis represents an extremely important test for the U.S. Biden administration's foreign policy. After his first year as U.S. president, Joe Biden is required to make strategic foreign and security policy decisions or responses that would be the most urgent and extremely significant.

How the Biden administration would address the Ukraine crisis would exert grave impacts on the stability of the international situation and on the Democratic administration's domestic and foreign ratings and U.S. domestic politics. In this sense, the world is closely watching the Ukraine crisis and U.S. responses as the most important geopolitical issue at present.

The Biden administration has no choice but to face an extremely severe and difficult situation after its bumpy first year. In a bid to heal the division of America that grew serious through the 2020 presidential election, recover the United States' global leadership, overcome the COVID-19 crisis and pursue domestic and foreign policies for the middle class, President Biden came up with specific measures one after another from just after the inauguration. He began to mend and enhance alliances with Japan, Europe, Australia and India. Positioning climate change as one of his top priority issues, the Biden administration came back to the Paris Agreement and implemented an aggressive diplomacy to lead the global enhancement of climate change countermeasures.

On the domestic front, the Biden administration enacted the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act for recovery from the COVID-19 crisis with support from Democrats in March 2021. In November 2021, the Democratic administration enacted a \$1 trillion infrastructure bill to promote infrastructure investment for economic recovery and long-term growth, securing support from some Republicans.

While making these achievements, Biden has seen his approval ratings declining since the second half of last year. The approval ratings, though differing by poll, decreased gradually from levels close to 60% just after his inauguration and have indicated a clear downtrend since the second half of last year. The latest ratings are around 40%, with some ratings slipping far below 40%. Factors behind the decline in approval ratings include criticism and discontent regarding foreign policy, economy and COVID-19 countermeasures. Although the Biden administration has tried to heal the division of American society, the division remains and has deteriorated in some sense. Republican supporters who account for half the U.S. population have remained basically critical of the Biden administration. Even among Democratic Party supporters who account for the other half, criticism of and discontent with the Biden administration and its achievements have been growing. These conditions have led President Biden's approval ratings to decline.

A key trigger of the decline was the Afghan crisis that followed U.S. troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan late last August. It sparked harsh criticism of Biden's foreign and security policies, leading to a clear downtrend of his approval ratings. Although the United States is the only superpower in the world, its relative power has structurally weakened, making it difficult for the country to remain the world's policeman. Particularly, the Biden administration is viewed as more cautious of using force than past ones. How the United States would engage with the world has become a matter of grave concern in the world. In this context, the Ukraine crisis is expected to test the future of the Biden administration.

Another important factor behind the falling approval ratings for President Biden is the stalemate over the Build Back Better bill that holds the key to the promotion of the Biden administration's extremely important economic and climate change measures. In a bid to win the passage of the bill, the Biden administration has made concessions including the substantial reduction of the relevant budget size and the curtailment of climate change outlays causing conflicts in Congress. However, it has fallen short of uniting Democrats. Specifically, the administration has failed to persuade Democrat Senator Joe Manchin who has held a casting vote in the Senate that is divided 50/50, leaving the bill stalled. In such situation, liberal and progressive Democrats, who have formed a mainstream group in the Democratic Party, grew discontent about President Biden's leadership and management, contributing to the drop in his approval ratings.

If the Build Back Better bill fails to be enacted, it will become more uncertain whether the United States could achieve the Biden administration's extremely challenging goal of cutting greenhouse gas emissions in 2030 by 50-52% from 2005. As the uncertainty about domestic measures funded based on law increases, the United States would have to depend on executive orders and other administrative measures for enhancing domestic climate change countermeasures while strengthening diplomatic and foreign policy initiatives. It would be difficult for the United States to urge other countries including developing and emerging market economies to enhance climate change countermeasures while being plagued with problems regarding its domestic measures. The United States would then face opposition and discontent from developing and emerging market economies, potentially escalating the north-south dispute over climate change. The United States' external campaigns for enhancing climate change countermeasures could work to increase China's geopolitical presence by beefing up China's significance in fossil fuel markets, its presence in the renewable and nuclear energy fields and its influence on a market for critical minerals required for energy transition. In this way, the United States' external campaigns for enhancing climate change countermeasures could conflict with its China policy as its top diplomatic priority.

The Biden administration also faces other domestic and overseas challenges such as the spread of Omicron COVID-19 variant infections, an inflation fear and concern about the future course of the economy. While the Biden administration is required to secure support from liberal and progressive voters who now account for 50% of Democratic Party supporters, the Build Back Better bill and other Biden initiatives are stalled in the divided society and congress, inviting discontent from his fellow Democrats. The Biden administration has thus plunged into a kind of dilemma.

November's midterm congressional elections are coming closer. Usually, a governing party faces an uphill battle in a midterm election. As approval ratings have declined for Biden and become lower for the Democratic Party than for the Republican Party, Republicans may expect to win a congressional majority through the midterm election, resulting in a divided government.

Whether the Biden administration would adjust or change its foreign and domestic policies to avoid such congressional change or cope with the potential Republican congress after the election is a grave issue for the future course of the administration. Whether the United States would adjust or change its policies that exert great influence on international politics, security, the global economy, climate change and energy issues is an issue that the world or Japan cannot ignore.

In this sense, President Biden's response to the Ukraine crisis will be extremely important for his future approval ratings and political management towards the midterm elections. The United States' and President Biden's leadership in stabilizing the international situation will continue to attract global attention.

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