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Donald Trump's U.S. Presidential Election Victory and the Middle East

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Donald Trump was elected as the next U.S. president in that country's presidential election. Trump is referred to as being unpredictable, and the issue of what sort of policies he will adopt towards the Middle East, where turmoil and conflict are spreading, is attracting attention. Naturally, at the present point in time the incoming Trump Administration's lineup is still not in place, so nothing is certain. Above all else, diplomacy is a low priority for the "America First" Trump Administration to begin with, and even within that, the Middle East can by no means be described as a theme of paramount importance. Consequently, even once the Administration is launched from here on, it seems likely it may not be possible to immediately discern a clear direction. Nevertheless, like many of the world's countries, the countries of the Middle East are preparing for the new Trump Administration based on their experience of his first presidential term.

When it comes to Arab Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, they are essentially welcoming Trump's return. Although his fickle decision-making is a cause of concern, these countries' compatibility with Trump, who favors transactional deals that emphasize actual benefits, is not bad, and it could be said that he is viewed as a leader who can be negotiated with. However, when oil facilities in Saudi Arabia were attacked in September 2019, during Trump's first presidential term, the U.S. did not demonstrate any clear moves to ensure the safety of the country, so it is already clear that being overly reliant on or placing excessive trust in the U.S. is risky. For that very reason, in recent years Gulf countries have been placing greater emphasis on building relationships with countries within the region and major countries outside it, even as they remain fully aware of the importance of their relationships with the U.S. This means, in other words, that when the Trump Administration adopts a more uncompromising approach towards

countries such as Russia, China or Iran there is a strong possibility that Gulf countries may not proactively support such policies.

In the latter half of November, I was invited to participate in the MEPS Forum (Middle East Peace and Security Forum) and an international workshop hosted by the American University of Kurdistan in Duhok in northern Iraq. At the workshop, approximately 40 Middle East specialists mainly from Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East came together to discuss the situation in the region, and at the forum, panels composed of researchers, government officials, and others presented their views to the several hundred people gathered at the venue. From among the diverse themes covered, I would like to introduce the discussions that related to the Trump Administration's Middle East policies.

To begin with, the policy attracting the most attention is the Administration's policy toward Iran. During its first term the Trump Administration advocated a policy of exerting "maximum pressure" on Iran. It unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed upon by the Obama Administration, and tightened sanctions. It is anticipated that during its second term also, the Trump Administration is likely to again try to ramp up pressure on Iran over the nuclear and missile issues and over its support for proxy forces within the region. At the workshop, a U.S. researcher pointed to the possibility that President-elect Trump will leave "all options" open with regard to Iran and will enter negotiations backed by a stance of being prepared to even use a degree of military force. Furthermore, one view voiced at the workshop was that given it is commonly accepted that Trump does not want to spark a fresh war in the Middle East, for that very reason it is possible that despite his hardline stance towards Iran, even he will arrive at some sort of agreement. In particular, following the outbreak of the Gaza War in October 2023 Iran has been driven into a severe position over this past year, including being subjected to direct military attacks from Israel and a succession of assassinations of leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, groups with close links to Iran. This state of affairs is undoubtedly also a factor lending support to such views.

It could be said that the leader within the Middle East region who is happiest about Trump's re-election is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel is pinning significant expectations on Trump, who in his first presidential term recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and brought about the normalization of diplomatic relations between a number of Arab countries and Israel, while leaving behind the Palestine

problem. Although no path can be seen as to how the immediate Gaza War and Lebanon War will be brought to a close, there is a strong possibility the second Trump Administration will back the normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel as a second round of Abraham Accords. That said, some workshop participants observed that although the Biden Administration had been attempting to back the normalization of diplomatic relations, using defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia as leverage, at present, with the Gaza situation having become as dire as it now is, it will probably be difficult to realize that goal without a deal of some sort in relation to the Palestine problem.

Meanwhile, the issue of how the standoff between the U.S. and China will spill over onto the Middle East was also taken up as a topic of discussion. The prevailing view was that the Trump Administration will adopt a hardline stance on China, but amid that a specialist from China remarked that for China, Taiwan and other Asian regions are its vital interests and so the emergence of a strategic competition between China and the U.S. in the Middle East seems unlikely. However, AI was cited as one exception to that. In recent years interest in AI technology has been strong in the Middle East, beginning with the UAE. However, in terms of its military applications and on other fronts AI poses problems directly connected to guaranteeing security, and tensions between the U.S. and China are rising in connection with AI technology supremacy and export regulations. It is thus anticipated that when it comes to the issue of AI regulation, Middle East countries too will experience ripple effects from China policy under the Trump Administration.

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