

Turnaround in U.S. Strategic Perception (1): Overview

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Foreign, national security, climate change and other policies of the U.S. Biden administration inaugurated last January are attracting global attention. Given that the United States is the only superpower in the world and the global governance center regarding international politics, military capabilities, economic power and technology, its top leader's policies and national strategies naturally exert significant influence on the world. When we observe the global energy situation, U.S. trends, policies and global influence are naturally far more important than those of any other country. This is because the energy situation and relevant problems are mostly characterized as global issues susceptible to international politics, geopolitics and the global economy on which the United States exerts great influence. The United States is far more important for energy markets than any other country. The United States, while being the world's second largest primary energy consumer after China, is the world's largest consumer and producer of oil as the most important internationally traded energy commodity and gas as the second most important one. U.S. energy markets' changes and relations with international markets and relevant U.S. policies are important for global energy supply and demand, and energy geopolitics. Regarding climate change as well, policies of the United States as the world's second largest greenhouse gas emitter naturally exert significant influence on international negotiations and on the rest of the world.

How U.S. policies and strategies exerting significant influence on the world are developed and implemented attracts global attention as a key factor for the overall international situation and global energy and environmental issues. As the development and implementation of U.S. policies and strategies are important, it is significant to analyze the perception of U.S. leaders or the U.S. establishment class that has had great influence on the development and implementation. Particularly, we should understand what has been the strategically important U.S. perception that has imposed great influence on U.S. responses to the overall international situation and the international energy landscape. This brief report overviews how the strategic perception that drives the United States has turned around since the beginning of the 21st century, focusing on major threats to national security, fundamental energy self-sufficiency changes and climate change perception changes.

First, the most important perception that has driven U.S. international strategies and national security and foreign policies is about what the most serious threat to U.S. national security is. This is because any U.S. administration gives top priority to developing political, diplomatic, military, economic, technological and other strategies against what is perceived as the most serious threat. In this respect, the most serious threat to the United States has dramatically changed since around the beginning of the 21st century. As a matter of course, the Soviet Union was the most serious threat during the U.S.-Soviet Cold War. The largest challenge for the United States then was confrontation with the Soviet Union. As the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the United States became the only superpower in the world. In such situation, terrorist attacks on the United States came on September 11, 2001. Through the terrorist attacks that came as a great shock to U.S. leaders and citizens, non-state actors such as terrorist and militant organizations, rather than any state, were rapidly perceived as the most serious threat to U.S. national security.

Under the perception, the United States launched a war against terrorism and invested national resources in invading Afghanistan and Iraq, toppling their regimes and reconstructing these countries.

As the international situation changed gradually, however, the U.S. national security perception underwent transformation. The largest situational change was the rise of China. As China increased its presence in political, military and economic fields, the United States grew vigilant and viewed China as challenging U.S. supremacy. This trend grew clearer in the second half of the Trump administration period. U.S. leaders then shared a perception that the most important thing for the United States would be to win a major power competition, or competition with China. In consideration of full competition with China, the Biden administration has shifted policy resources to a China strategy focusing on cooperation with allies. The Biden administration's foreign policy strategy also gives priority to such values as human rights and democracy. As the U.S.-China confrontation has escalated, China has enhanced its strategic cooperation with Russia and sought to develop relations with the Middle East, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Competition between states is working to increase geopolitical tensions in the world. Furthermore, the Taliban militant group's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has further complicated the global geopolitical situation and led the United States to pay attention to the war against terrorism again.

Second, I would like to point out that changes in U.S. energy self-sufficiency and subsequent perceptual transformation have exerted great influence on overall U.S. strategies. The U.S. energy issue, or the largest U.S. energy security challenge, has been how to struggle with a decline in energy self-sufficiency or growing dependence on energy imports. The United States was a major oil-producing country boasting the world's largest oil production, exports and surplus production capacity, working as the keystone of global energy governance. In the 1960s, however, the United States turned a large net oil importer and increased its dependence on oil imports. Then, the first oil crisis in the 1970s came as a great shock to the United States, prompting then U.S. President Richard Nixon to announce and implement its Energy Independence plan. While subsequent U.S. administrations maintained policies to improve energy self-sufficiency, U.S. dependence on energy imports continued to increase until the early 2000s. U.S. energy and energy security policies then remained based on the perception of energy shortage.

However, the shale revolution dramatically changed the situation. U.S. oil and natural gas production has substantially increased, boosting the United States to the position of the world's largest oil and natural gas producer. As oil, natural gas and LNG exports have expanded, the United States has almost achieved energy independence. The shale revolution has also contributed to invigorating the U.S. economy. Under the revolution, natural gas replaced coal, playing a key role in reducing U.S. CO₂ emissions. In an even more important development, the perception for U.S. energy policy has shifted from shortage to abundance, as symbolized by the concept of "energy dominance" adopted during the Trump administration period for taking advantage of U.S. oil and gas supply to maximize U.S. national interests. Under the Biden administration, the political environment for oil and gas has changed dramatically. However, abundant oil and gas supply continues to support the United States. Energy shortage is no longer cited for U.S. foreign policy or national security strategies.

Third, the perception of threats regarding global environment and climate change issues has changed greatly. As is well known, such dramatic change came every time the presidency shifted between the Republican and Democratic parties. Particularly, climate change policy has swung under the Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden administrations. The swing has widened in recent years. After the Trump administration was negative toward the climate change challenge, the Biden

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administration now positions climate change as a crisis and gives priority to the challenge. The United States has joined Europe to lead the world in tackling climate change. The great green transition in the United States has exerted impacts on energy choices and policies in the United States and the rest of the world. Its impacts have spilled over to international relations, diplomacy and geopolitics because climate change is a global issue. While the climate change issue is accompanied by North-South confrontation, we must closely watch implications of the United States' aggressive climate change policy on its relations with developing countries and its geopolitical challenges including a U.S. strategy on China.

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