

## Middle East: Withdrawal of US Forces, Revival of the Taliban Regime, and Search for a New Regional Order

The completion of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the restoration of the Taliban regime symbolized the transformation of the regional order in the Middle East in 2021. As the United States shifts its diplomatic and security focus from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific, China and Russia are increasing their presence in the region, and China in particular is taking part in reorganizing the regional order by strengthening ties with Israel, Gulf Arab oil producers, Iran and Turkey. The US-Iran relationship has entered a new phase with a change of administrations on both sides, and the future of the JCPOA has garnered attention. In addition, security issues including those in North Africa are mounting, such as the ongoing proxy wars and refugee deadlocks in Syria and Yemen, the political upheaval in Tunisia triggered by protests against inadequate responses to the coronavirus crisis, the military coup in Sudan during the transition to civilian rule, and the military conflict in Ethiopia.



Protesters gather at Marble Arch ahead of a march in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan, in central London, August 2021. (Photo by AFP/Aflo)

### US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Its Impact

As the US shifts its diplomatic and security focus from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration decided to carry on with the Trump administration's decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan with the new deadline of the end of August. On August 15, before the withdrawal was completed, the Taliban seized control of the capital Kabul, regaining power for the first time in 20 years after being ousted by the US invasion following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Some Afghans, including the elites and those living near the capital, had enjoyed the benefits of democratization and economic prosperity over the preceding two decades, but no improvement was seen on issues such as bribery and corruption, social injustice and poverty, creating a climate that allowed the Taliban to return to power, particularly in rural areas. Ashraf Ghani's government, which had been supported by the international community, collapsed suddenly without a fight, and the confusion caused by the withdrawal of US troops and the exodus of Afghans who felt themselves in danger under a revived Taliban regime, as well as terrorist attacks across the country, shocked the world. The establishment of an "inclusive

government” encompassing multiple ethnic groups, women and former government officials has not been realized as initially asserted by senior Taliban officials, and there are concerning signs of suppression of women. Although the Taliban are seeking international recognition and continued humanitarian assistance, an emergency summit meeting of the G20 in October confirmed that member countries would provide humanitarian assistance through UN agencies rather than through the Taliban interim government. Although no countries have yet officially recognized the Taliban regime, some, including China, Russia and neighboring countries, are dealing with the interim government on a working level. As the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan deepened, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held an emergency meeting in December and decided to establish a food procurement fund. The World Bank also announced that \$280 million would be transferred from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, which had been frozen since August, to UN agencies.

The resurgence of the Taliban regime has had a major impact on the situation in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as on the foreign policies of neighboring countries, including Russia, China, Pakistan and India. Threat of international terrorism has also increased. For Russia and Central Asian countries, which have long regarded the rise of the Islamic State (IS) militant group in Afghanistan as a threat, the reinstatement of the Taliban, which is hostile to IS, could serve as a check on that militant group. However, it has been suggested that, in addition to al-Qaeda, which is believed to still have ties with the Taliban, IS might intensify its activities to highlight its resistance to the Taliban or take advantage of gaps in the Taliban’s hold on security. Concerned about the impact on its internal security, China, which has the Uighur issue, criticized the US’ withdrawal, saying that the US should take responsibility for Afghanistan’s future. China attaches importance to its relationship with Afghanistan from the perspectives of the Belt and Road Initiative routes and that country’s underground resources such as rare earth elements and has been working to build relations with the Taliban regime by contacting them even before the US withdrawal was completed.

As the US withdrawal from Afghanistan shows, the Biden administration is trying to reduce the engagement of resources in the Middle East. Amid this power shift, major countries in the region, including US allies like Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt are seeking closer relations with China, as are Iran, which is at odds with the United States, and Turkey, a regional power that has adopted omnidirectional diplomacy. Iran has been particularly active in strengthening its ties with China, signing a 25-year comprehensive agreement with China in March and joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September. The SCO, led by China and Russia, has already been joined by Turkey as an observer, in addition to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar that were approved as dialogue partners in July 2021. Many other Middle Eastern countries, including Israel, Syria, Iraq and

Bahrain, have also been applying for the dialogue partnership, regardless of their relationship with the United States. Afghanistan has already been participating as an observer since 2012, which offers one route for the country to strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries.

### **Establishment of an Israeli Coalition Cabinet and Relations with the United States, Airstrikes in Gaza, and the “Shadow War” with Iran**

In June, hardline Netanyahu government, which had been in power for 12 years since 2009 in Israel, was replaced by the Bennet coalition cabinet led by the centrist Yesh Atid and including eight parties from the right to the left, in addition to Arab Israelis.

In May, just before Netanyahu’s departure, Israel and Hamas clashed for 11 days before reaching a ceasefire brokered by Egypt. It was the first major confrontation since May 2018, when President Trump decided to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Behind the military confrontation lay tensions over one of the key points of contention in recent years on the Palestinian issue: the campaign by Jewish settler groups to expel the Palestinian population in East Jerusalem. During Ramadan in April, clashes broke out between the Israeli government and Palestinian Muslim residents at the Damascus Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem. When the decision to evict Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem was announced, the protests escalated into a mass demonstration. The Israeli army under the Netanyahu administration just before the change of government repeatedly exchanged massive air strikes and rocket fire with Hamas. Israeli air strikes on Gaza continued intermittently between June and September, causing extensive damage and casualties, including among children.

While President Trump effectively permitted settlement activity, the current Biden administration supports the “two-state solution” and has opposed settlement expansion. Despite the US’ opposition and the differing views within the Israeli ruling coalition, the Bennett government announced a series of new housing projects for Jewish settlers in the West Bank in October, East Jerusalem in November, and the Golan Heights at the end of December. The international community, including the United States, continues to criticize settlement activities as a violation of international law. In particular, the Syrian government strongly condemns Israel’s plan to double the number of settlers within five years in the Golan Heights, which Israel has occupied since the Third Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and annexed in 1981 (without the approval of the international community).

In the Middle East waters, the “shadow war” between Israel and Iran continued. Attacks on Israeli-linked ships, possibly by Iran, began in February and at least five attacks were confirmed. At the end of July, two crew members were killed in an attack on the *Mercer Street*, an oil tanker owned by a Japanese

company and operated by an Israeli firm, off the eastern coast of Oman. The Israeli, British and American governments have determined that Iran used suicide drones to attack, but the Iranian government has denied any connection. Israel believes Iran is using profits from its crude oil deals with Syria's Assad regime to support Hizbullah, and the Israelis in recent years have attacked at least 12 Iranian ships in the Red Sea and in the Mediterranean Sea off Syria. Iran's attacks on Israeli ships could be considered retaliation. With the amount of maritime trade between Israel and the Gulf region expected to increase following the summer 2020 Abraham Accords, Iran may have attacked Israeli ships in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea to place greater restraints on Israel. Iran and Israel have not officially admitted their involvement in any of the attacks but have repeatedly retaliated in a manner that did not inflict any casualties to avoid escalation into an all-out conflict. However, the attack on the *Mercer Street* resulted in casualties, and it is necessary to keep a close watch on the possibility of a similar incident or further expansion.

### **Iran's Presidential Election, Establishment of a New Government, and Future of the JCPOA**

In Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline anti-American conservative, put together a cabinet after the presidential election in June 2021. A close associate of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and head of the judiciary since 2019, Raisi has been subject to US economic sanctions for his role in the execution of scores of political prisoners in the past and has faced criticism from Amnesty International. While the disqualification of many candidates through preliminary screening by the Board of Supervisors had made Raisi the favorite to win, turnout for the presidential election was 48.8%, far below the 70% turnout in the previous election (2017).

The circumstances surrounding the Iranian nuclear issue have become even more challenging. Immediately after its inauguration, the new Biden administration sent a positive signal on returning the US to the JCPOA. Indirect talks between the United States and Iran were held from April through the mediation of other JCPOA signatories, but no accord was reached before the Iranian presidential election in June. Although President Raisi vowed, along with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, to remain committed to the JCPOA, the new



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi speaking during the first meeting of his cabinet, in Tehran, August 2021. (Photo by AFP/Aflo)

Iranian government sought assurances that the countries involved, including the United States, would not withdraw from the agreement or impose new sanctions, and no noticeable progress was made in the indirect talks that resumed at the end of November after a five-month hiatus. During this time, Iran's nuclear activities in violation of the JCPOA have further expanded. In addition to the start of production of uranium metal in February, Iran has begun to enrich uranium to 20% and 60%, well above the upper limit of 3.67% specified in the JCPOA, and has been steadily increasing its stockpile of enriched uranium. As of September, Iran's breakout time - the time it takes to produce enough weapons-grade fissile material for one nuclear weapon - is believed to have been reduced from the one year envisioned by the JCPOA to one to two months. Iran has also suspended many verification and monitoring measures by the IAEA under the JCPOA, thereby reducing the transparency of its nuclear activities. The United States has indicated that it will consider other options if indirect talks fail to produce results, and the situation needs a close watch, including on Israel, which is determined to check Iran's nuclear development. In December, the UAE accepted the visit of the Israeli prime minister based on the Abraham Accords and sent a special envoy to Iran, a longtime trade partner. These moves by the UAE that take the regional balance into consideration are worth noting.

### **Perspectives and Recommendations**

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Taliban regime have raised new concerns about the destabilization of the situation in the Middle East and the increased risk of international terrorism, and these factors are expected to have an impact on international relations between major powers, not least the increased involvement of neighboring countries, including China and Russia, in Afghanistan. Despite the shift of the United States to the Indo-Pacific, however, the basic structure in which events in the region have a significant impact on global security has not changed, and Japan needs to actively take initiatives and contribute in three areas in particular: Afghanistan, Middle East peace process, and the Iranian nuclear issue.

The first is Afghanistan. While the international community is trying to ascertain the direction of the Taliban regime and is withholding its approval, the country's economic and social activities continue to be severely affected by insecurity, logistical disruptions and food shortages, making humanitarian assistance highly urgent. While it is important that the international community continue to encourage the Taliban to run a government that upholds basic human rights, particularly the rights of women, it is essential that humanitarian assistance in response to the immediate humanitarian crisis continue through international organizations. Since 2001, Japan has invested a total of approximately 775 billion yen in wide-ranging assistance, including capacity building for maintaining security, social reintegration of armed opposition groups, and development assistance. Aid to increase food production will be particularly crucial in



supporting Afghanistan's economy in the future. However, any development assistance above and beyond humanitarian assistance will need to take into account the situation regarding the recognition of the Taliban government. The number of Afghan students who have studied in Japan now stands at nearly 1400, and many of them have only barely managed to escape to neighboring countries or have been internally displaced since the Taliban regime returned to power. Japan should also take measures to ensure the safety of, and provide relief to, those who have studied in Japan.

The second issue is peace in the Middle East with respect to the Israel-Palestine issue. Centering on the Israeli government's expansion of settlements, which has been strongly criticized by the international community, the Japanese government needs to press harder than ever for an end to the exchanges of violence and for building of mutual trust and confidence. At the same time, the new Israeli government has welcomed Japan's long-standing humanitarian assistance and aid to Palestine in areas such as human resource development and agricultural development. It is important that Japan continue to make steady efforts through such assistance based on relationships of trust with both Palestine and Israel.

Third is the Iranian nuclear issue. Based on its consistent policy on nuclear non-proliferation, and building on the friendship Japan has cultivated with Iran, it is important that the Japanese government continue its diplomatic efforts to ensure that the Iranian nuclear issue does not lead to an escalation of regional tensions, through encouraging Iran to return to compliance with the JCPOA and resume cooperation with the IAEA through channels for close dialogue with both the Raisi and Biden administrations. ■