

# Biden faces unfamiliar 'new Middle East'

**A**s far as some U.S. foreign and security policies are concerned, U.S. President-elect Joe Biden is unlikely to have to be overly conscious of differentiating his approaches from those of outgoing President Donald Trump, whom he is set to succeed in January 2021. Regarding U.S. relations with Russia, for example, it will be enough for Biden, like Trump, to just side with the government of Ukraine that refuses to recognize the two pro-Russian separatist republics in eastern Ukraine.

But, when dealing with a set of compounded crises in the



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Middle East stemming from the region's labyrinth of ethnic, religious and sectional structures, Biden actually will be challenged to a considerable extent since there are many new factors created by Trump that will certainly require the incoming president's determination to redefine them in his own way.

One example is Afghanistan, from which Trump has decided to withdraw much of the U.S. military presence by the middle of January. The Taliban, which once ruled the country, and the Islamic State extremist group remain active there, posing a security threat to the stability of not only Afghanistan but also Central Asian nations.

Meanwhile, though Biden has already pledged to rejoin a landmark 2015 deal aimed at halting Iran from developing nuclear weapons, the murder of an Iranian nuclear scientist on Nov. 27 now makes it difficult for him to go ahead with his word soon after being sworn in as the new U.S. president. Iran accuses Israel of being behind the killing. At the same time, as in the aftermath of the assassination of an Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander in a U.S. airstrike in January, the slaying has deprived Iranian President Hassan Rouhani of chances to seek common ground for compromise with the United States on the nuclear issue. To put it another way, Israel now has all the relevant conditions in its favor to put a brake on Biden's possible approach to Iran.

## New geopolitical landscape

The Middle East situation Biden will face after his inauguration is likely to be one that has changed during the four years of the Trump administration. Taken as a whole, the region's political landscape and dynamics will be different from those of the past to the extent that what can be referred to as a "new Middle East" is awaiting his inauguration.

First, the Arab-Israeli confrontation is no longer the

heart of the Middle East problem. The facilitation of cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia and Israel's recent normalization of diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan — all of which were enthusiastically brokered by the Trump administration — have reduced to mere words the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and the removal of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which together used to form the very basis of the Arab cause of pursuing Middle East peace.

Second, Arab unity has collapsed, as manifested by the ongoing Syrian civil war. As a result, the Arab crescent stretching from Lebanon to Syria to Iraq to Iran has turned out to be the "Shiite crescent." In this connection, it should be pointed out that the do-nothing policy on Syria adopted by the U.S. administrations of Trump and former President Barack Obama has allowed Russia to bring the Middle Eastern country into its sphere of interest.

Third, Turkey's interventions in the civil war and the Kurdish issue in Syria have led Russia and Iran — both of which back the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad as strategic allies — to grant Turkey a special status as a nonaggressive partner in conflict resolution with each of them. This means that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has successfully had Russia and Iran acknowledge that Turkey can have a certain level of say in Syria and Qatar, which were once under Ottoman rule.

All of this points to the arduousness of the "new Middle East" that awaits the United States under the Biden administration.

## New 'Great Game' players

Another event that reflects the emergence of the "new Middle East" is the "six-week war" the two South Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia fought from late September to early November over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh and parts of Azerbaijan, which had been occupied by Armenia.

It is particularly noteworthy that Russia brokered a cease-fire between the two republics and that Turkey rendered strong military support to Azerbaijan, enabling it to regain control of much of the land it lost to Armenia.

These developments illustrate the qualitative change in the modern Middle East problem that arose from the classical Eastern Question of the 19th century — in which Britain, France and Russia played key roles primarily in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire — and has been characterized by the partition of Palestine and the Gulf War, among other events.

At the same time, these developments show that the nature of the Great Game, a great power confrontation that began in the 19th century between Britain and Russia for control of Central Asia, has changed with Britain's departure from the regions concerned and the absence of the United States. Now, the non-Arab regional powers of Russia, Turkey and Iran, and furthermore Israel, are involved in the new Great Game as key players. This means that the "Middle East problem" has transformed into the "new Middle East problem" in which the new Great Game players concern themselves.

Will Biden opt to get the United States involved anew in the power game in the "new Middle East"? If and when he chooses to do so, he will inevitably encounter a vexing issue — Israel, which has set up an intelligence gathering base in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, sided with it in the six-week war by providing military aid. Israel is believed to have found Azerbaijan attractive not only as a strategic location to collect intelligence but also as a gateway to natural resources in the Caspian Sea basin.

Back in the United States, Biden can't ignore the presence of Armenian-American voters in the Democratic Party's stronghold of California, the greater Los Angeles area in particular. About 40% of the 1.5 million-strong Armenian-American population is said to reside in the state, with one of its past governors and a number of former and current members of the U.S. Congress being of Armenian descent.

In order for Biden to encourage Armenia to break with Russia, he will have to fulfill the absolute condition of enabling Armenia to rein-

state control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. During the six weeks of fighting, Azerbaijan said it captured areas of the disputed region and, therefore, it is unlikely to give up the fruit of the conflict. As such, Biden will have to look squarely at the significance of the presence of Azerbaijan as a resource-rich country that past U.S. administrations could not afford to ignore.

## New complexity to problem

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the Caspian basin, including offshore areas, has about 48 billion barrels of crude oil reserves and about 292 trillion cubic feet (8.2 trillion cubic meters) of natural gas reserves. The estimated amounts are equivalent to more than 40 years of Japanese oil imports and to more than 70 years of Japanese liquefied natural gas imports. Moreover, about 75% of the oil and 67% of the gas reserves are said to be within 160 kilometers of the Caspian Sea coast. Not even Biden will be able to resist the lure of natural resources in the Caspian region. If the United States rejects the tempta-

tion, not only Russia, taking advantage of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) — an economic union of states in Eastern Europe and Western and Central Asia — but also China, advancing the Belt and Road Initiative further to build an expansive economic bloc, will feel increasingly encouraged to seek full-fledged involvement in the new Great Game and the "new Middle East problem."

In addition, it should be noted that Russia and Turkey, which jointly brought the six-week war between Azerbaijan and Armenia to an end, have a common interest in preventing the United States from intervening in the South Caucasus, just as they have been doing in Syria. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin has no confidence in Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, as the latter has recently distanced himself from Russia while approaching major European countries and the United States. The Russian leader has deployed Russian troops to Azerbaijan in the name of peacekeeping under the cease-fire agreement, gaining an opportunity for Russia to have interests in a country bordering Iran for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Symbolizing the brotherhood between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Ankara provided Baku with Turkish-made drone weapons, helping Azerbaijan end the war with Armenia in its favor. Ankara also had Moscow agree to the opening of a land transit corridor between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The post-Soviet sovereign states, known in Russia as "the near abroad"; the Turkic peoples, a collection of Turkish-speaking ethnic groups including Turkish and Azerbaijani nationals, among others; and the Iran-advocated "Shiite belt" stretching from the Gulf and the Caspian region, including Azerbaijan, to the Mediterranean region — all also have a common interest in warding off any U.S. intervention, albeit much belated, in their respective spheres.

The real name of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, known for having protected but finally turned his back on Armenia, is Sergey Kalantaryan, as he is of Armenian descent. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran, which has a history of protecting Armenia to countervail Turkey, is an Azeri (Azerbaijani). These facts are just two examples of the complexity of the compounded crisis in the Middle East, which indicates that Biden cannot deal with such complexity by just sticking to the Democratic Party's favorable proposition of advancing human rights and democratization.

(Special to The Yomiuri Shimbun)

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