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Recommendations for Responding to the Current Situation in Afghanistan: From the Perspective of an Expert on Central Asia

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Commentaries in Japan regarding the rapid developments in Afghanistan and the Taliban's rise to power have focused on the U.S. perspective because the current situation was primarily caused by the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Some commentaries have attempted to justify the Taliban rule or irresponsibly proposed that foreign countries disengage from the current situation and thus abandon the nation. Based on the perspective of a specialist on Central Asia, which is a region adjacent to Afghanistan, the author expresses that the current situation in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries requires a more delicate approach. To this end, the author provides the following recommendations.

1. Focus on the diversity and multi-ethnicity of Afghan society

In Japan, Afghanistan is often considered a tribal society, thereby indicating that the Taliban rule, which is based on local customs, is suitable for the country. However, the reality is more complex. Limited information regarding how the Taliban gained power indicates that they negotiated with local strongmen, as well as bureaucrats from the previous regime, and in some cases, offered money to demand that they disarm and submit to the Taliban rule. The Taliban have also attempted to address economic issues by offering jobs to young people and are powerful enough to convince those weary of the long war to give up resistance. They have also gained more sophisticated negotiating skills and problem-solving abilities, compared with their previous rule over Afghanistan prior to the September 11 attacks in the US.

However, people with diverse values reside in Afghanistan, and many people seek women's rights as well as cultural and religious freedom. Other nations worldwide should not remain mere spectators of oppression with the belief that the Taliban can maintain their free rein in a tribal society. In particular, the Pashtuns, often regarded as a tribal community that is well-suited to the Taliban rule, only account for approximately 40% of the population of Afghanistan. The remaining population comprises diverse ethnic groups, such as Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Among these groups are Shiites (the Twelvers and the Ismailis), as well as non-Muslims, who are considered enemies of the Taliban.

Some Tajiks have continued to resist the Taliban rule, whereas other ethnic groups are passively obeying the Taliban for now. However, there is no guarantee that the Taliban will be able to govern the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society in a fair and stable manner. Immediately after capturing Kabul, the Taliban stated that they would form a coordinating council including the former chief executive (equivalent to the prime minister) Abdullah Abdullah, who had close ties to the Tajiks in the Panjshir Valley, thus indicating their intentions to form an inclusive government. However, no progress has been noted in the formation of such a council. The interim government unveiled on September 7 is dominated by male Pashtun Taliban leaders. The international community should pay close attention to ensure that the rights of various people are not violated by the Taliban's policies.

2. Do not abandon Afghanistan; acknowledge responsibility

Western countries, such as the U.S., have intervened militarily in various parts of the Middle East and Central America. Their involvement has often served to exacerbate local conflicts and social problems, and ultimately, they withdrew their military without resolving any issues. The case of U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan is similar to this scenario. The U.S. intervened militarily in a violent manner and exercised thoughtless and arrogant "leadership" in a nation-building initiative, before finally abandoning many local collaborators and pulling out. In the West and Japan, there has been considerable focus on the fact that 20 years have passed since the September 11 attacks. However, Afghanistan has been buffeted by wars involving foreign countries for more than 40 years, including the Soviet invasion that began in 1979, the support of Western and Arab countries to the resistance movement against the Soviet invasion, and the resulting civil war involving Pakistan.

The U.S. and Europe should understand that the sense of humiliation, victimization, and abandonment among people from many countries worldwide led to the rise of anti-Western sentiment and created an opening for China and Russia to intervene. Although the Taliban's return to power may not directly lead to large-scale terrorist attacks similar to the September 11 attacks, we cannot rule out the possibility that the destabilization of Afghanistan may lead to a resurgence of global jihadist organizations. Therefore, the international community should focus on stabilizing Afghanistan without using military intervention.

Although Japan did not directly participate in the military intervention, it dispatched the Maritime Self-Defense Force to the Indian Ocean to refuel vessels operated by the coalition forces comprising the U.S. and other countries. Japan also cooperated with the U.S. and Europe to provide assistance related to security, infrastructure, education, medical care, and rural development in Afghanistan. Therefore, Japan can be considered a participant. It is truly regrettable that Japan failed to quickly evacuate collaborators, such as local staff members of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), by aircrafts from the Self-Defense Force. Japan should

provide the best efforts to help these people evacuate or return to a safe life as soon as possible, and welcome them either as immigrants or visitors to Japan. Along with the U.S. and Europe, Japan must recognize that the international community shares a joint responsibility to not abandon Afghanistan, and must thus make efforts to ensure peace and restoration in the country.

3. Do not recognize the Taliban too quickly, but negotiate and deal with them in a realistic manner

The collapse of the Ghani administration was largely caused by its own fault and that of the U.S. However, the Taliban regime was established by force and through the destruction of the conventional constitutional system. Moreover, the establishment of a government that will represent the entire population and safeguard human rights has yet to be planned. Therefore, the Taliban regime should not be recognized, at least for the time being. However, if the Taliban were to persist and remain in power for a while, other countries would find it impossible to entirely ignore them, thus the Taliban should be treated as a dialogue and negotiation partner. A situation should be created wherein the international community can make requests and offer advice regarding various issues, including human rights and governance.

Currently, the key issues include determining methods for addressing humanitarian concerns, such as the provision of food and medical care. Based on the experience of various conflict zones, a global framework that would allow international organizations to smoothly operate without officially recognizing de-facto governments must be swiftly established.

There are no powerful warlords in the northern region that receive foreign support, as was the case when the Taliban ruled the nation previously. Therefore, the Taliban's dominance is unlikely to be swayed easily. However, resistance movements are expected to continue in various parts of the country. The international community, including Japan, should strike a delicate balance by listening to the opinions of dissenters while making efforts to prevent the recurrence of a large-scale civil war. Numerous weapons that the U.S. and other countries provided to Afghan government forces are now in the hands of the Taliban. If the situation becomes increasingly chaotic and the Taliban's weapon control becomes lax, these weapons may be diverted to various radical groups, thereby posing a threat to neighboring countries and the West.

The Taliban themselves are primarily concerned with the domestic affairs of Afghanistan. However, if they find themselves in a tight spot because of economic hardships or conflicts with major countries, they may turn to radical external sponsors for financial help. In this scenario, there is a possibility that the Taliban could strengthen their ties with international terrorist organizations in the same way that they harbored Osama bin Laden as he prepared to wage jihad against the U.S. This may lead to the revival of international terrorist activities, which have been on the decline in recent years. To prevent this situation, the international community must establish a connection with

the Taliban regime to ensure that these circumstances can be managed even when the regime is denied recognition.

4. Respond to the diverse needs and concerns of neighboring countries

The Taliban's return to power is primarily a domestic issue for Afghanistan. With the exception of Pakistan and, to a limited extent, Tajikistan and China's Xinjiang region, neighboring countries lack the foundations for extremists to expand their influence. Therefore, the latest development may not lead to immediate changes in the situation for neighboring countries. However, these countries are still presented with a difficult challenge. Moreover, these neighboring countries have different problems, interests, and concerns.

Pakistan and India are widely noted to have conflicting interests in Afghanistan. The Central Asian countries also have different interests and concerns, although they are not at odds with one another. Tajikistan, which has a strong interest in the situation of the Tajiks in Afghanistan, objects to the Pashtun hegemony promoted by the Taliban. The Tajikistan government is also watchful against the activities of people who have fled to Afghanistan in opposition to the Rahmon regime and joined the Islamic State – Khorasan Province or those who have formed their own armed groups. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has been tightly controlling its borders to prevent chaos while deepening economic involvement in Afghanistan through the supply of electricity. Due to plans for building a railroad, Uzbekistan has been in dialogue with the Taliban. Turkmenistan is also interested in economic exchange and plans to export natural gas to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan does not share borders with Afghanistan, and is thus not deeply involved with the country, although interested in conducting some economic exchange with Afghanistan as well as safeguarding the ethnic Kyrgyz in the country. Kazakhstan distances itself from Afghanistan even further. However, Central Asian countries, including Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, are confronted with the shared challenge of interdicting narcotics.

The U.S. has sometimes downplayed differences in national interests and attempted to involve Central Asian countries in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. They have also sought to strengthen relations between Central and South Asia to reduce the influence of Russia. However, such efforts were hardly successful. Foreign countries, including Japan, should fully understand the differences in national interests when providing support for border and drug control in Central Asian countries, as well as for their economic cooperation with Afghanistan. Japan already has a well-established track record in these areas, albeit on a limited scale. In addition, the unique human contacts and information that Central Asian countries (especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) possess regarding Afghanistan can be useful to countries outside the region, such as Japan.

There is also the issue of Afghan refugees—an issue that will impact a wide

range of regions, including Europe. Central Asian countries are generally reluctant to accept Afghan refugees. Hence, exerting external pressure on these countries to accept such refugees would be inappropriate. However, once these refugees are accepted, the international community should provide support, particularly in the cases of Pakistan and Iran, which already face a considerable influx of refugees.

For a long time, the turmoil in Afghanistan as well as the international isolation of Iran have continued to block access to the Indian Ocean for Central Asia, thereby preventing the region's interaction with the rest of the world through the sea. If Afghanistan and Iran are reconstructed under the leadership of China and Russia, this may lead to China and Russia gaining higher influence stretching from Central Eurasia to the northwestern part of the Indian Ocean, albeit such a development may not easily occur. Nevertheless, if it does take place, Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" initiative and the international order centered on the U.S. and Europe would further erode. To prevent such a situation, the U.S., Europe, and Japan should reflect on their past failures and respect the interests of the local people as they engage with Afghanistan and Central Asia. In so doing, they should avoid creating animosity by acting in an arrogant or thoughtless manner.

(This is the English translation of an article written by UYAMA Tomohiko, Professor, Hokkaido University, which originally appeared on the e-Forum "Giron-Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on September 13, 2021.)