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## **U.S. Strategy for the War in Gaza: Changes and Prospects**

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### **Changes in the Biden administration's strategy for the war in Gaza**

#### ***Protecting Israel's right to defense, supporting the destruction of Hamas, and opposing a ceasefire***

The Biden administration's diplomatic strategy for the war between Israel and Hamas, which began with a surprise attack by the Iran-backed Islamic militant group Hamas on October 7, 2023, has undergone significant changes as the conflict has prolonged. In the early stages of the war, the United States opposed the UN Security Council's call for a ceasefire three times, saying that Hamas must be prevented from rearming, and actively supported Israel's right to defend itself and its goal of destroying Hamas. On October 18, President Biden visited Israel amidst missiles and rockets, expressing America's unwavering commitment to Israel. He called on Israel to precisely eliminate Hamas members through surgical strikes to minimize harm to civilians. Although he was unable to meet Arab leaders as the four-party talks with the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and Jordan were canceled due to the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza, President Biden called for easing tensions in the region. The United States defended Israel and emphasized the principle of 'hostage-release first, ceasefire later.'

#### ***Strengthening humanitarian support for Palestine, emphasizing immediate ceasefire, and promoting a 'two-state solution'***

However, in March 2024, the Biden administration's strategy took a sharp turn toward an immediate ceasefire, a humanitarian aid operation, and a concrete postwar peace plan. The humanitarian disaster in Gaza worsened into a serious famine, and criticism from the international community grew as the number of deaths among children and women increased. On March 2, the United States began its first relief airdrop operation, dropping food for

38,000 people from the U.S. Central Command transport aircraft to help Gazan residents at risk of starvation. The United States also began construction of a temporary port along the Gaza Strip's coast to deliver hundreds of truckloads of relief supplies per day. On March 20, the U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken visited the Middle East for the sixth time since the outbreak of war and met with the leaders of Israel, the Palestine Authority, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt to negotiate an exchange of hostages and prisoners. However, negotiations between Israel and Hamas reached a stalemate due to sharp conflicts arising from the demands of both sides. Israel has demanded an exchange of about 40 out of the 130 remaining hostages for 800 Palestinian prisoners and proposed a ceasefire for six weeks, but Hamas has insisted on an exchange of hostages and prisoners only after a preliminary ceasefire and the end of military operations in the Gaza Strip.

As the humanitarian crisis in Gaza reached a breaking point with no sign of negotiations, uneasy tension between the United States and Israel began to emerge. Prime Minister Netanyahu insisted on carrying out a clearing operation in the Rafah area, where the remnants of Hamas were hiding, as well as where a large number of 1.5 million residents of the Gaza Strip have taken refuge. The Biden administration expressed opposition to the Rafah operation. Furthermore, the U.S. government emphasized that the future of post-war Gaza depends entirely on the Palestinian people and the capacity of the Palestinian Authority needs to be developed. The U.S. government repeatedly called for a 'two-state solution.'

Ultimately, on March 26, the United States abstained from voting on a resolution calling for a ceasefire co-sponsored by 10 UN Security Council countries, including Korea, Japan, and Switzerland, and the resolution was passed with the support of 14 countries. This was the first resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip adopted since the outbreak of war. The United States abstained because it did not officially condemn Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack.

## **Background and implications of the changes in U.S. diplomatic strategy**

### ***Public opinion deteriorating among American voters and policy communities***

The Biden administration's change comes as the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, caused by the Israeli military's attack, worsens, leading to a decline in the United States' moral standing and a deterioration of public opinion both within the United States and in the Middle East. Arab and Muslim Americans, along with young voters, expressed dissatisfaction with the

Biden administration's active defense of Israel. Even within the State Department, concerns were raised about the administration's approach. The Biden administration had to revise its diplomatic strategy for the war and restore its credibility as the Democrats began to lose their votes. In addition, Iranian proxy organizations in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen declared solidarity with Hamas and sought to expand their front lines with simultaneous provocations, claiming to liberate Palestine. In particular, the Biden administration removed the Houthi rebels from the list of terrorist organizations in order to provide diplomatic incentives to restore the JCPOA that the Trump administration abandoned and to promote peace negotiations in the stalled civil war in Yemen. The Biden administration eventually designated the Houthi rebels as a terrorist organization again on January 17, 2024, strengthened humanitarian support for Palestine, and called for an immediate ceasefire. It seems difficult to escape the assessment that this change is the result of a belated response to the military offensive of the Houthi rebels and a way to make up for the failure of the appeasement policy against Iran.

### ***Worsening public opinion in the Middle East***

As the number of deaths in the Gaza Strip increased significantly, the United States, actively supporting Israel, came under criticism not only in the Middle East but also in the Global South and suffered a serious blow to its moral reputation. In particular, public opinion toward the United States in the Arab region has seriously deteriorated. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Arab Center Washington DC and The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies from December 2023 to January 2024, 94% of citizens in 16 Arab countries responded negatively regarding the attitude taken by the United States in the war. Of these, 82% rated it as 'very bad' and 12% as 'bad.' During the war, most countries in the region, including rivals such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, condemned Israel with one voice and called for an immediate ceasefire, forming a united front against the United States, which opposed the ceasefire.

### ***Netanyahu's behavior and the deterioration of U.S.-Israel relations***

Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu clashed with the Biden administration by declaring that he would push ahead with the operation in Rafah, known as Hamas' last bastion, in order to achieve the goal of annihilating Hamas. In addition, Prime Minister Netanyahu's post-war scenario also directly runs counter to the 'two-state solution' supported by the Biden administration and the international community. Netanyahu, who denies the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, along with extreme right-wing elites, has been announcing

plans for Israel to reoccupy the Gaza Strip after the war, or at least initially station security forces to maintain security. Ultimately, the Biden administration pressured Israel to change its leadership, leading to sharp conflict between the United States and Israel. In November 2023, the U.S. government issued an executive order regarding violence in the West Bank, and in December, Secretary of State Blinken issued a ban on U.S. visas for those involved in violent acts. Furthermore, in February 2024, four Israeli settlement residents were sanctioned, and in March, the settlement area was included in the list of sanctions for the first time.

### **Prospects for America's postwar peace plan**

To plan for post-war peace, the Biden administration called for the resignation of the current leadership of Israel and the Palestinian Authority and advocated for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state through the reunification of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The United States, which made a surprise cabinet change in March to reform and strengthen the capacity of the Palestinian Authority, criticized Prime Minister Netanyahu for interfering with humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and pressured Israel to conduct early elections. Furthermore, the Biden administration invited Netanyahu's rival, National United Party leader Benny Gantz, to the White House, formalizing the idea of "distancing Netanyahu," and strongly called for a surgical operation to minimize civilian casualties in Gaza.

However, on April 13, when Iran directly attacked Israel for the first time in history, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a \$26 billion Israeli security support bill that had been pending for six months, and the Biden administration's pressure on Netanyahu entered a brief lull. Nevertheless, in the course of this Iran-Israel conflict, the United States once again proved itself as the only ally that can prevent Israel's existential threat. Israeli citizens, who reaffirmed the values of the United States in a crisis, have become increasingly fierce and organized against Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is jeopardizing Israel's relationship with the one and only ally. Prime Minister Netanyahu will attempt to extend his political life by delaying the ceasefire until the U.S. presidential election in November. As the Biden administration and the Israeli opposition join forces to block it, the future of the Gaza war will become more complicated and bleak.

Meanwhile, the South Korean government expressed concern about Israel's military operation in Rafah in February 2024 and called for the protection of civilians in accordance with international law. In April, the government announced the provision of an additional \$8 million in humanitarian aid to Palestine to improve the situation in the Gaza Strip. In

addition, in the same month, South Korea voted in favor of the UN Security Council resolution recommending to the General Assembly that Palestine become a full member of the United Nations. Although the resolution was rejected as the United States exercised its veto, arguing that inter-party negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority should precede it, the South Korean government made it clear that it sympathizes with Palestine's desire to join the United Nations and reaffirmed its support for the two-state solution. It is worth noting that South Korea, with the goal of becoming 'a Global Pivotal State (GPS),' emphasizes humanitarian support for Palestine to uphold international norms, serve as a bridge with the Global South, and advocate for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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